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DRAGON

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DRAGON

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Unearthing Unearthed Arcana

Our ever-inventive Research and Development Team and writers churn out a lot of material, not all of which makes it into a published product. Some gets cut because a manuscript is too long and something's gotta go; some is rejected for thematic, story, or marketing reasons; some represents speculative forays into territory that looks promising, but no one knows for certain how it will pan out until actual prospecting is done; and some is written in spare corners of time for home campaigns or just for fun.

We don't think "it wouldn't fit" is a good enough excuse to deprive our readers of some dynamite ideas. With that in mind, we're reintroducing Unearthed Arcana, a venue where we can present fascinating, off-beat, envelope-stretching Dungeons & Dragons material that might not be seen any other way.

It kicks off this month; tomorrow, in fact. The first installment, by Peter Schaefer, uses a modified disease format to offer up a menu of curses (as in, when the knob-nosed witch lays a curse on you that gold will bring you nothing but misery). In the future, you might see rules for more detailed critical hits, twisted paragon paths or epic destinies, gunpowder weapons, wizards' duels, bizarre campaign outlines ... we won't put limits on the possibilities.

All of this comes with one big caveat: none of what you'll read in Unearthed Arcana has been through our normal development cycle. It's all experimental, optional, and unofficial. You won't find it in the D&D Compendium or Character Builder. Customer Service won't provide official answers to questions about unofficial rules.

Read it, play with it, stress it, twist it to your heart's content. If something here goes over especially well, it could even wind up back on the table of contents for a future product.

Most of all, let us know what you think at dndinsider@wizards.com.

Behold these mighty judagas. They have tamed the forest demons and claimed the head of the beast that troubled us. Let them divide the bones as trophies, bind the monster's spirit in its skull, and prosper well with their spoils. They make our land safer. Honor them well.

–Lalali-Puy, Oba of Gulg

Monster Hunters of Athas

By Chris Sims ✦ *Illustrations by Alexey Aparin*

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In the bleakness of Athas, opportunity exists only where the bold seek it and take it. Those who wish to remain free avoid political struggles and the risks of crime. They instead sell sword and spell for wealth and glory, and perhaps, the good of those weaker than they are. Countless such mercenaries people the city-states.

A few among these free warriors find their fortunes by facing the horrors of the wastes. Such hunters keep streets safe by flushing unwelcome monsters from hidden dens within settlements. They ply their craft along trade routes to allow softer souls easier passage. Sometimes, monster hunters bring prey back alive for taming or arena spectacles.

Success in the hunt brings myriad rewards. In the wilderness, a defeated creature's corpse can provide supplies and raw materials for clothing, weapons, and goods that are less mundane. Captured creatures can be sold as exotic pets or fodder for gladiatorial bouts. Hunters, having willingly faced innumerable situations and dangers, become tougher and wilier over time. They hone their skills for the job, and on occasion, their wounds heal with unpredictable effects from the supernaturally twisted ecology. Scars become assets, carrying power within them.

Monster Hunting: A Player-Driven Campaign

When you take on the role of a monster hunter in Athas, you take some control of the course of your campaign. At the very least, you're telling your DM that you want to face the worst Athas has to offer. You're also suggesting that you might want to take on the difficult task of subduing and capturing monsters for various reasons, from supplying the local arena to gathering materials for alchemical items. You might also decide you want to tame, train, and sell creatures. The DM can then structure encounters, skill challenges, and rewards around your desires. If you're particularly hands-on and you work it out with your DM, you might even choose targets and assign yourself quests. Going out and capturing your own crodlus for mounts not only provides a scenario for adventure, it also makes your mounts special to you and allows the DM to grant your mounts as part of an adventure's rewards.

Hunting for Fame and Profit

Life is cheap on Athas; resources are precious. Becoming a monster hunter means living a life of meaning by providing safety and resources for your patrons and others. Hunters live boldly, seeking out danger and traveling far from the oppression of city authorities.

Some hunters act as tools of the local government by capturing, dispersing, or killing dangerous humanoids. Wise hunters avoid legal or political entanglements by hunting universally hated pests and monsters rather than criminals or dissidents who might have important allies.

A group of successful hunters returns to civilization with proof of exploits that bring respect from citizens of all types, from templar to slave. That proof is usually in a form that can prove valuable. Hunters who endure the travails of their risky career are sure to become folk heroes and possibly even wealthy.

Hunter Traditions

Culture varies among the seven cities. So do the traditions that support and define monster hunters in the city-states.

Balic

A sense of civil duty and a desire to be remembered in civic mythology—immortalized in play and poem or the Temple of Heroes—motivates Balican hunters. Although the democracy of Balic is a sham, the patricians' and templars' power and desire for reelection makes them ideal patrons for hunters. Lesser scions of noble houses have garnered honor for their families by taking on the service role of monster hunter. Given the community spirit of Balican hunters, they are humbler than their Tyrian counterparts, at least in appearance. Balic has a tradition of gladiatorial combat as rich as Tyr's, and Balic also offers easy access to the Silt Sea and the Southern Wastes. Slaying or capturing giants is considered among the highest of heroics in Balic.

Draj

Through the astrological charts which most Draji have drawn up for newborns, the stars call some to the heroics of monster hunting. Other hunters come from among the jasuan knights and lesser warriors sworn to the knights who carry on a family tradition or hope to make a name. Moon priests, those trained in the Way in the House of the Mind, and magically talented calmec scholars might also be part of a hunting party. Hunters have the opportunity to provide amusements for the Palace of Gladiatorial Combat as well as for the Royal Menagerie. The highest honor a Draji hunter can aspire to is to have Tectuktitlay

select one of their subdued beasts for sacrifice upon the Father and Master Temple.

Gulg

The jungle and its spirits are enemies in Gulg, as are the terrors that stalk the forests, mountains, and plains near the city. A variety of Gulg's citizens might join in hunts—judagas, seers, masters of the "evil" primal spirits, and even nganga. Such hunts are primarily for glory and trophies, but they also serve to protect Gulg, gain stock for domestication, and provide combatants for the Field of Spears. The tradition of single combat on the Field of Spears means that few powerful beasts are subdued for return to Gulg. Instead, hunters return with heads and other trophies as proof of their mastery over the forest. Brave hunters venture to the Witchgrove to bring back the heads of fey creatures. The headhunting tradition of Gulg is one of the primary sources of magical trophy traditions.

Nibenay

Nibenese hunters are calm and practical warriors. Although they respect and display grace, they are given to refined efficiency rather than showmanship. Hunters can provide beasts for Nibenay's arena, but more money and accolades can come from driving beasts away from Nibenese interests and protecting logging camps against the primal magic of harrying druids and Gulgan spiritualists. The nobles of Nibenay have an insatiable appetite for the exotic and ample wealth to buy and maintain pets. Merchants of the Sages' District employ hunters for mundane materials, while reagents and illicit items such as poisons can find buyers in the Hill District.

Raam

The mixing of castes is unusual in Raam, yet a group of Raamite hunters is likely to contain members of more than one caste. Warriors, priests, and unclean might be found working together in such a party. Without an unclean member, a hunting company is unlikely to deal in anything involving a monster's carcass. (Some groups are made up entirely of unclean who have unusual skills and talents for their caste.) Hunters might provide arena fodder or find employment among merchants, but most work for a nawab to provide battle beasts for the factional warfare common in Raam.

Tyr

Kalak's palace in the Golden City is connected directly to the Stadium of Tyr, and that is no result of mere whim. Tyr has a bloody and honor-bound gladiatorial history. While he lived, Kalak rarely missed the games. Those who provide beasts for the arena can become idols as famous as the top gladiators. A hunter does well to cultivate a personality as showy as a gladiator's battle techniques. Kalak's death changed nothing about this cult of personality and skill. If anything, hunters have more opportunity to shine in Tyr now that civil authority is divided among the city's factions. Patrons abound. A hunter might not even need to leave the city, given the dangers of Under-Tyr. Tyr also rests near diverse terrain types, which means that exotic prey need not be transported long distances back to the hunters' home base.

Urik

The meritocracy of Urik's civic life makes dangerous work attractive. Like numerous commoners before them, those who triumph repeatedly in the heroic trade can find themselves not only lauded by the people but also raised in status by influential patrons. The Pit of Black Death has need of monstrous foes for gladiators to face, but the military emphasis of Urik's culture also places importance on capturing and training beasts for war. Leonine beasts are most prized in Urik.

Other Traditions

Halflings Hunters: Halflings of the Forest Ridge are expert trappers and poison users, and they practice strange magic. In a waste-not fashion, they also eat just about anything they kill which is even remotely edible. Hunters among halflings like to take quarry alive to later show off to authority figures. Once a creature's presentation is done, halflings kill it and strip it of everything useful. Halflings take their traditions with them, so such habits exist even among those who have lived in cities for generations.

Primal Hunters: Hunters who revere primal spirits focus their efforts on creatures destructive to the fragile and waning natural world. Aberrant monsters are common on Athas, as if the warped magic that laid waste to the planet brought the madness of the Far Realm close. These enemies are foremost on a primal champion's hit list, equal only to creatures that use defiling magic. Elemental incursions are also offensive to the worldly order, so primal hunters drive such monsters back to the chaos that spawned them.

Tribal Hunters: Villagers such as Silt Sea archipelagans, nomads such as the Tamwars, slave tribes, elf tribes, and thri-kreen packs all rely on hunting for survival. Food and supplies might not be the only motivation for such hunting. Small communities count on the strong and bold among the populace to kill or drive out the nightmarish monsters of the wild. Those who practice unusual or forbidden magic are more likely to be found in remote locales, and tribal monster hunters can best provide such practitioners with bizarre reagents.

Veiled Alliance Hunters: The Veiled Alliance relies on monster hunters for material components used in rituals, alchemical items, magic items, and reagents. Although the Alliance isn't necessarily altruistic toward non-arcanists, members act heroically as hunters to gain popularity among common folk. Public esteem has helped more than one member mask unusual travel and dealings.

Hunter Teams

Monster hunting starts with brains. A successful team brings together diverse and useful skills from the planning stage onward. A team should have training in every skill relevant to monster knowledge. Some redundancy is good, especially in Dungeoneering and Nature, because casualties among hunters can be high. If your team has the luxury of choosing a target before the conflict, choose one you know a lot about. Use that foreknowledge to equip yourself properly and plan the confrontation. In this regard, a typical monster-hunting team isn't that different from a normal party of adventurers.

Also like a normal adventuring party, the group needs to cover all the roles for efficiency, and synergy among the characters is key. A leader in a hunter team needs to focus on powers that boost or grant mobility and allow extra attacks. Leader powers such as *direct the strike* (warlord at-will attack) or *ire strike* (ardent at-will attack) which allow high-damage party members to attack instead of the leader are also good. Defenders and controllers should focus on powers that take away monster advantages and freedom of action, especially movement. These characters should work to ground creatures that have unusual movement modes in order to keep such monsters on the group's level and within attack range. Strikers need to deal lots of damage quickly, but they also must act in a way that aids their teammates. Although a rogue might benefit the most from combat advantage, it's good for everyone. A timely *pressing strike* from a barbarian can set up more than one team member for a flank advantage.

As combat unfolds, pay attention to which tactics work and which don't. Learn from your victories but especially from your mistakes. Coordinate powers and other capabilities. Retrain when possible to shore up weaknesses in the team's overall performance rather than your character alone. Working together in this way can be an out-of-game activity for players. One or more could even act as DM for single, practice-run encounters to see how your team works as a whole. Warriors don't just leap into danger; they train for it with rehearsed tactics and adaptable reactions.

Hunters' Tricks

A successful hunter uses specialized powers and weapons to surprise foes and keep them off balance. Nets, whips, cahulaks, and similar weapons allow specialists to perform unusual moves and gain control over a battlefield.

Feats

The feats presented here are available to any character who meets the prerequisites.

Zadatl Novice

Prerequisite: 4th level, proficiency with the zadatl

Benefit: You can swap one of your 3rd-level or higher encounter attack powers for the *zadatl grab* power.

Zadatl Grab — **Attack Power**

You lunge forward with your zadatl, twisting it as your strike lands so that your foe is caught in the sharp pincers and held well away from you.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must use this power with a zadatl.
Target: One creature of size Large or smaller.
Primary Attack: Strength or Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 2[W] + Strength or Dexterity modifier damage, and you grab the target with your zadatl. You can end the grab as a free action. If the target escapes the grab, you can make the secondary attack against it as an opportunity action.
Level 17: 3[W] + Strength or Dexterity modifier damage.
Level 27: 4[W] + Strength or Dexterity modifier damage
Secondary Attack
Attack: Strength or Dexterity vs. Fortitude
Hit: 1[W] + Strength or Dexterity modifier damage.
Level 27: 2[W] + Strength or Dexterity modifier damage

Zadatl Expert

Prerequisite: 8th level, proficiency with the zadatl

Benefit: You can swap one of your 6th-level or higher utility powers for the *zadatl expert stance* power.

Zadatl Expert Stance — Utility Power

You watch for the perfect opening to strike with your zadatl.

Daily ✦ Martial, Stance
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: You assume the zadatl expert stance. Until the stance ends, when you hit a creature with an at-will weapon attack power using a zadatl, you can use a free action to grab the target with your zadatl. You can end the grab as a free action.

Zadatl Specialist

Prerequisite: 10th level, proficiency with the zadatl

Benefit: You can swap one of your 9th-level or higher daily attack powers for the *zadatl control* power.

Zadatl Control — Attack Power

After snagging your foe with your zadatl, you can push it around and trip it if it tries to escape.

Daily ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must use this power with a zadatl.
Target: One creature
Attack: Strength or Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 3[W] + Strength or Dexterity modifier damage, and you grab the target with your zadatl. While you have the target grabbed in this way, the target takes a –2 penalty to escape the grab. In addition, until the grab ends, whenever you move, you can slide the target with you an equal number of squares but it must remain within the zadatl's reach. If the target escapes the grab, you can make the secondary attack against it as an opportunity action.
Level 25: 4[W] + Strength or Dexterity modifier damage.
Secondary Attack
Attack: Strength or Dexterity vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2[W] + Strength or Dexterity modifier damage, and the target falls prone.
Miss: This power is not expended.

Hunters' Arsenal

Preparation is important. Equipment can make all the difference in a hunter's or hunting party's success. Readying for a mission means gearing up with attacks and defenses against the intended quarry, from alchemical items to which a creature is vulnerable to potion fruits to protect against known attacks. Slain foes provide trophies that can double as useful tools in coming fights. Facing wasteland monstrosities leaves lasting marks on a hunter, and these scars can also become the means to future victories.

Weapons

Like gladiators, Athasian hunters often rely on superior weapons and focused combat methods with such arms.

Zadatl: Also known as the pincer staff, this Draji polearm was developed to grab and control targets that might be captured for later sacrifice. It consists of a long haft with a crossbar at the end with two pincerlike tines attached. The pincers are often actual mandible pieces from giant insects.

Adventuring Gear

Hunters need special gear to bring some monsters back alive.

Cage: Cages are made of strong material to confine creatures. A cage has equally spaced bars and a door. Bar spacing can be customized to specific creatures. The typical cage can hold two creatures of its size, a creature one size larger (uncomfortably), or four to six creatures one size smaller. (Creatures more than one size smaller than the cage probably will be able to slip out between the bars.) Cages are normally transported on animals or vehicles. A vehicle such as a wagon can have a cage permanently mounted to it by adding the cage cost to the vehicle cost.

SUPERIOR MELEE WEAPON

Weapon	Prof.	Damage	Range	Price	Weight	Group	Properties
Two-Handed							
Zadatl	+2	1d8	–	30 gp	7 lb.	Polearm, Spear	High Crit, Reach

CAGES

	–Number of Creatures Held–					
Size	Huge	Large	Medium	Small	Break DC	Cost*
Huge	2	4	8	16	25	100 gp
Large	1	2	4	8	20	80 gp
Medium	0	1	2	4	20	50 gp
Small	0	0	1	2	16	20 gp

* A cage can be made stronger by doubling the cost for each +5 to the break DC.

Magic Rewards

Parts of warped desert monsters can be used to make items that have resonance with the creatures from which they came. These same fiends leave behind scars on those who battle them. A monster hunter uses any advantage he or she can get.

Alternative Rewards: Battle Scars

A hunter's prey can leave its mark on the hunter. On Athas, these magical boons become part of a hunter's being and grow in power along with the hunter they mark.

Mark of the Tembo Level 7+ Rare

A tembo has had you in its dreadful fangs, and you yet live.

Lvl 7 2,600 gp Lvl 27 1,625,000 gp
Lvl 17 65,000 gp
Battle Scar
Property: You gain resist 5 necrotic. If an enemy causes you to lose a healing surge or reduces the amount of hit points you regain, you gain temporary hit points equal to 5 + your highest ability score modifier.
Level 17: Resist 10 necrotic.
Level 27: Resist 15 necrotic.

Reflexive Psychic Shroud Level 7+ Rare

Through your run-ins with horrors such as cilopses and dagorrans, you have developed an innate psychic shield that masks your presence.

Lvl 7 2,600 gp Lvl 27 1,625,000 gp
Lvl 17 65,000 gp
Battle Scar
Property: You gain a +2 item bonus to Stealth checks.
Level 17: You gain a +4 item bonus to Stealth checks.
Level 27: You gain a +6 item bonus to Stealth checks.
Power (Daily): Free Action. *Trigger:* You roll initiative. *Effect:* Until the end of your next turn, you are hidden and cannot be seen by blindsight or tremorsense.

Scent of Weakness Level 5+ Rare

After so many encounters with death, you still have the look of a stranger to battle. You give the false impression that you're slow, easy prey.

Lvl 5 1,000 gp Lvl 25 625,000 gp
Lvl 15 25,000 gp
Battle Scar
Property: You gain a +1 item bonus to Bluff checks.
Level 15: You gain a +2 item bonus to Bluff checks.
Level 25: You gain a +3 item bonus to Bluff checks.
Power (Daily): Free Action. *Trigger:* You complete your first move or attack in an encounter. *Effect:* One enemy of your choice within 5 squares of you is marked by you (save ends).

Armor

Natural materials are the best choice for a second skin in the harshness of Athas. Some of these materials are easier to strengthen with particular enchantments.

Anakore Armor — Level 4+ Common

The hide of burrowing aberrants helps you resist being held in one place and avoid the risks that come with lack of mobility.

Lvl 4	+1	840 gp	Lvl 19	+4	105,000 gp
Lvl 9	+2	4,200 gp	Lvl 24	+5	525,000 gp
Lvl 14	+3	21,000 gp	Lvl 29	+6	2,625,000 gp

Armor: Leather, Hide, Scale
Enhancement: AC
Property: You gain a +2 item bonus to saving throws against restraining and immobilizing effects. In addition, you gain an item bonus to skill checks to escape attempts. The bonus equals the armor's enhancement bonus.

Head Slot Item

The resonance of a creature's power can live on in any part of it. Binding the spirit of a creature into trophies offers a hunter power.

Gaj Headdress — Level 9+ Uncommon

A few gaj antennae are included in this luxurious feather headdress. This creates a feedback loop which channels psychic pain into vigor.

Lvl 9	4,200 gp	Lvl 29	2,625,000 gp
Lvl 19	105,000 gp		

Item Slot: Head
Property: You gain a +2 item bonus to saving throws against ongoing psychic damage and effects that daze, stun, or dominate. When you save against one of these effects, you gain 5 temporary hit points.
Level 19: 10 temporary hit points.
Level 29: 15 temporary hit points.

Consumables

Magical creatures provide bizarre possibilities for altering one's own supernatural powers.

Nightmare Tongue Dust — Level 6+ Uncommon

A tembo's tongue is required to make the weakest of these antihealing reagents. The tongue of a nightmare beast goes into the stronger forms of the dust.

Lvl 6	1,800 gp	Lvl 26	1,125,000 gp
Lvl 16	45,000 gp		

Reagent
Power (Consumable): Free Action. *Trigger:* You use a 5th-level or lower encounter or daily attack power that has a damage keyword. *Effect:* One target hit by the attack cannot regain hit points until it takes an extended rest.
Level 16: 15th-level or lower attack power
Level 26: 25th-level or lower attack power

Wondrous Items

Practical magic is needed for a hunter's work.

Bloodglass Cage — Level 10 Uncommon

Magic infuses the red obsidian bars of this otherwise standard-looking cage.

Wondrous Item 5,000 gp
Property: The *bloodglass cage* is a standard cage of a particular size. When one creature is locked inside, by concentrating for one minute, you seal the *cage* so that the creature cannot leave or damage the *cage*, or affect anything outside the *cage*, for 24 hours. The restraint ends instantly at the end of 24 hours, but it can be renewed before then with another minute of concentration.

About the Author

Chris Sims has played roleplaying games for 30 years, and he has helped produce games for nearly 10. Before he laired in the Seattle exurbs, he was an editor/designer at Wizards of the Coast. There, he worked **Duel Masters, Dungeons & Dragons**, and Magic: The Gathering. Now he blogs about the D&D game for critical-hits.com and is up to no good as a game-industry freelancer.

Rewarding Your Hunters

As the DM of a monster-hunting group, your life is a little easier. The players are invested in their characters' vocation and the rewards it offers. You have the opportunity to emphasize the unique nature of Athas's survivalist culture with the treasure you give. Take the alternative rewards advice in *Dungeon Masters Guide 2* and the *Dark Sun Campaign Guide* to heart. Make most items and boons meaningful to the narrative of your campaign, and thereby important to the players.

The story of the hunt and its aftermath becomes more evocative if each important victory adds to the character's power and reputation. As long as it makes sense as part of the story, imbue items and characters with magic after a big battle concludes. Look for ways you might repurpose magic items into rewards related to the prey the hunters brought down. Use the items here as examples. Parcel out treasure made up of natural materials from your hunters' quarry. Encourage the players to have their characters learn to make consumables and other monster-related items.

A party of hunters, each arrayed in his or her trophies, makes a perfect savage Dark Sun image. It's also likely to help make an unforgettable and highly personalized campaign. Every item and boon brings to mind the tale of a successful hunt and a great time at the gaming table.

A Legacy in Shadow

By Robert J. Schwalb
Illustrations by William O'Connor

Shadar-Kai in the Forgotten Realms®

I endure, but I carry no easy burden. Darkness assails my heart, and my thoughts drown in the gloom of my inadequacies. If I give in to this bleakness, I find myself adrift in melancholic thoughts so bitter and so forlorn I feel as if I will cease to be.

The Shadovar name this thing that has been done to me a gift—a blessing from the Dark Lady—but I have known no reward that carries such a price. Am I unworthy? Have I not risen to the power Shar has invested in me? Since I came into this grief, I have known nothing but numbness, as if I was trapped in a prison of meaninglessness and isolation. Each new day brings with it a struggle to stir into life—a battle in which I must fight to not surrender my very essence to the cancerous shadow blossoming inside my breast.

I have overcome my ennui by devoting my attention to perfecting my body and expanding my knowledge, and each accomplishment helps hold back the despair. I often wonder if I merely add more days to the sadness that is my life.

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The bones of lost empires litter the world, their vestiges found in the shattered ruins and the displaced peoples seeking refuge from the chaos and upheaval shaping the last century. As old civilizations fade into legend, new peoples arise from their ashes, blinking in the uncertain light to find a place and purpose in this changing world. Some people share much with their ancestors, preserving their traditions and cultures. Others are changed by history, with forces beyond mortal ken shaping and altering their course until they become something more or something less than they once were.

The shadar-kai are new to the Forgotten Realms. They are a people shaped by the unpredictable mingling of the Spellplague and the dark magic mastered by the shades. Created by this union—humans newly returned from exile in Shadow transformed—the shadar-kai's bodies and minds have altered until they have become a race apart. Many do remain in the Empire of Netheril, but since they awoke in the world, they have spread beyond its bounds to found new homes amid the wreckage of fallen civilizations.

In the core D&D world, the shadar-kai have strong connections with the Raven Queen, having attained their powers through a desperate bargain to stave off death. Since the Raven Queen is not present in the Forgotten Realms, the shadar-kai in this setting arose under different circumstances, shaped and molded by clashing forces to become something other than human. Over the following pages, you'll find details on the shadar-kai's origins, how they fit into the Forgotten Realms, and several new feats with which you can customize your shadar-kai adventurers.

Shadar-kai in Dungeons & Dragons Settings

Much about the shadar-kai in the Forgotten Realms remains true for the shadar-kai found in core D&D. Their origins might be different, but they face similar challenges and benefit from the same talents as do their cousins in other settings. For more information, including additional feats, paragon paths, and an epic destiny, be sure to check out "Playing Shadar-Kai" by Chris Sims in *Dragon* magazine #372. Similarly, the game mechanics presented in this article can benefit shadar-kai regardless of the setting in which you play.

Neither history nor legend recalls the shadar-kai because they are a people born into the world scant generations ago. Although largely unknown, their anonymity in the world's annals will not last long, because they stir from poisoned homelands to stake their claim on destiny's spoils. Despite their relative youth, the shadar-kai are a people ascendant, spreading out from the Empire of Netheril that sired them to establish new holdings across the world and beyond. They might also come from isolated ruins deep in the Underdark or the twilight lands of Shadow, where they return to the magic partly responsible for their creation. A desperation in these people drives them to grow and prosper to equal their human cousins, but though the shadar-kai are prompted to do so by a shadowed legacy, they must continually guard themselves from its influence and origins.

The shadar-kai's history includes that of the Netherese peoples. They share common ancestry; both trace their lineage back to antiquity when seven simple fishing villages took the ambitious step toward mastering magic and founded one of the most dangerous and fearsome magical empires the world has known. As any scholar versed in the ancient knowledge is aware, the Netherese awoke in ancient times and rose to greatness through war and conquest. Dissatisfied with their gains, they reached further and dug deeper to raise their mastery over magic until one day, the greatest of their number elevated himself to become as a god. For his hubris, the empire was cast into ruin, its lands scoured, and survivors driven from this world into exile, where they languished in Shadow for countless eons.

Time spent in the Shadowfell did not leave these humans untouched. The plane, although neither good nor evil, can influence visitors who spend time there by darkening their thoughts with despair. More than the plane's insidious whispers, the corruptions spreading through the exiles' ranks stemmed from the same avarice that led to the downfall of their civilization. Mystra had stripped magic from them, so they turned to the Shadowfell's power instead. To acquire it, they forfeited their souls and invited the darkness into their hearts. Thus they set in motion their own apotheosis and led themselves to becoming the shadow creatures called shades.

Time saw the Netherese return to Toril. Their one surviving city, called Shade Enclave, emerged from the darkness to hover above the blasted wasteland that was once their verdant and burgeoning empire.

The Shadovar, as they called themselves, conquered the Anauroch Desert and enslaved its people. Not content with their holdings, they tested their borders to enlarge their restored empire beyond the wastes and scoured the world for lost Netherese artifacts. Once they secured their holdings and borders, they also manipulated rival nations to reveal information about the wider world so that they could plan their conquest of it, an aim toward which they still work in the present day.

SHADAR-KAI HOMELANDS

The shadar-kai are most common in the Empire of Netheril, enclaves in the Shadowfell, and outposts in the Underdark. For a detailed shadar-kai settlement, be sure to check out "Explore Ikemmu: The Gloaming City" by Matt James in *Dungeon* magazine #175.

TOUCHED BY DARKNESS

When the Netherese emerged from the Shadowfell, many retained their humanity, even though all had been born in Shadow and had never known any world aside from the dark reflection's permanent twilight. The shades were far different from their subjects, however. The shadow contaminating their souls worked a profound change, and in time their human, albeit gaunt and darkened, appearance gave way to something monstrous. The shades became creatures of living shadows so far removed from their mortal origins that they were a people apart.

As well, the Netherese had bred blasphemous creations in the Shadowfell to form servants and warriors to fight on their behalf. Called the krinth, these gray-skinned humanoids bore little resemblance to their human counterparts, because in them festered the essence of shadow demons. The longer the fiend resided within them, the more wicked and unpredictable they became. So dangerous were the krinth, they were kept as lowly servants and berserker warriors released only to fight.

AWAKENING OF THE SHADAR-KAI

Not even the Netherese and their vaunted shadow magic could protect them from the Spellplague, but the magical catastrophe's effects were not immediately apparent. In fact, the effects revealed themselves only in the months and years that followed, and only in the human populations who were shadowborn, meaning those humans who were conceived and born in the Shadowfell. The first to change were the adolescents. At puberty, they acquired an ashen pallor or mottled appearance. Despair set in, infecting them like a disease and spreading throughout the Shade Enclave. Gradually joining these afflicted souls were adults and young children, newborn babes, and even grandfathers. While widespread, it did not result in a complete and total transformation, but it did alter a great many citizens—nearly half the population in the capital city.

It did not take long for the seers to discern what had happened. The Spellplague had awakened the latent shadow energy bound inside their bodies until they became something akin to the shades themselves, not fully vested with shadow power but possessing enough talent and raw energy that they could do things no others could do. It was also clear the metamorphosis was permanent, because the effects did not fade; rather, they intensified.

Perhaps the greatest and most alarming trend was the sorrow. Many succumbed to the gloom surrounding them and slowly wasted away until only a twisted wraith remained.

Panic spread through the Shade Enclave, but Prince Rilaven Tanthul's quick thinking quashed the growing fears. He went before the assembled host and revealed that he had received a vision from Shar stating she would offer her blessings to her favored children, and the boon she bestowed was in those who bore the mark of her touch. He called the new race the shadar-kai in the high tongue of ancient Netheril, which means Those of Shadow's Gift.

The Shade Enclave boasted shadar-kai in the greatest numbers, but it was not the only site to be experience such transformations. All across Faerûn, shadowborn humans had felt the Spellplague's touch and became as those humans in the Netherese Empire. These people fled to the Underdark or returned to the Shadowfell to make new lives for themselves and struggle against the melancholy gripping their hearts. The shadar-kai are a true race, for they produced a whole new generation from unions of shadar-kai and from shadar-kai/human pairings.

Just as the Spellplague spawned a new race, it also signaled the end of another bu sending the accursed krinth into a sharp decline. Their numbers dwindled in proportion as the shadar-kai's increased. Some have even gone so far as to say that the krinth were the shadar-kai's antecedents, a failed race born from misguided magic that was ultimately corrected in the shadar-kai's evolution.

Since emerging into the world, the shadar-kai spread out from the Netherese Empire. Some joined other shadar-kai peoples, forming into enclaves in the Underdark's shallows or retreating for the Shadowfell to discern some way to mitigate the curse resting so heavily upon them. These fledgling communities are the hope for the shadar-kai peoples, because in them a new civilization might arise to join those others who have come before.

Shadow's Curse

The shadar-kai did not emerge from their transformation without a price. All possessed unique talents, strange powers, and a quickness and cleverness that could exceed human limitations, though from the start, the shadar-kai also endured a dangerous sadness, emptiness, and boredom that arose from a dampening of their sensations and emotions. Surrendering to the ennui meant oblivion and the creation of twisted undead horrors, so it is in every shadar-kai's best interest to fight against the darkness within and triumph over it.

The greatest tool in their arsenal is stimulation. Shadar-kai test themselves in all they do: pushing against their limits to master the complex and arcane arts, to become peerless warriors wielding cumbersome weaponry, or to devour the world's lore and exceed all others in understanding. These accomplishments work for some, but not all. Others must seek out different diversions to chase away their gloom.

Many shadar-kai are dismissed as hedonists—slaves to their whims and desires. The assessment might be true for some, but a great many shadar-kai must excite their emotions through pain, anger, frustration, lust, or love. They hold nothing back, and the intensity of their feeling can be off-putting for those unfamiliar with their customs. So a shadar-kai might be the first in battle, using the fight to demonstrate both battle prowess and also to stir feelings in their hearts and feed the void that threatens to devour them.

The need for physical and mental stimulation is recognizable in the apparel shadar-kair wear and the customs they keep. Shadar-kai use pain to keep their focus. Many decorate their bodies with tattoos, scarification, and body piercings, from ears to the most surprising and painful locations imagined. Although rare, there are shadar-kai—almost exclusively those who serve darker powers or who experience such desperation that they see no other recourse—cut, whip, beat, or otherwise injure themselves.

On Religious Matters

The shadar-kai are reluctant patrons of the gods. They view the divine with healthy skepticism. They see value in religious ecstasy, and those who find service with a god favor those who can stave off their melancholy or at least explain their difficult lives. Shadar-kai living in Netheril follow Shar as is customary among those people, while those forging their own paths favor gods who appeal to their training, with Tempus being favored by warriors, Kelemvor for those obsessed with death's threat, and Selûne for those opposed to their people's dark legacy.

New Heroic Tier Feats

The following feats are available to any character who meets their prerequisites.

Darkening Mind [Augment]

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, any psionic class, *shadow jaunt* racial power

Benefit: You can spend 1 power point when you use *shadow jaunt* to add 2 squares to the distance you would teleport. In addition, when you do so, you remain insubstantial until the end of your next turn.

Dawn the Black Sun [Divinity]

Prerequisite: Channel Divinity class feature, must worship Shar

Benefit: You gain the Channel Divinity power *dawn the black sun*.

Dawn the Black Sun — **Feat Power**

Shar's vengeance washes through you, exacting a terrible price from those who defy you.

Encounter ✦ Channel Divinity, Divine, Fear, Implement
Immediate Reaction **Close burst 2**
Trigger: An enemy within 2 squares of you damages you with an attack.
Target: The triggering enemy
Attack: Your highest ability vs. Will
Hit: The target is blinded until the start of your next turn. If the target takes any damage while blinded by this attack, the blindness ends and you can slide the target up to 3 squares as a free action.

Doom of Jiksidur

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, *shadow jaunt* racial power

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Stealth checks.

Any enemy hit by your attacks while you are insubstantial due to your *shadow jaunt* racial power falls prone.

Dread of Sakkors

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, *shadow jaunt* racial power

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Intimidate checks.

When you hit an enemy with an attack while you are insubstantial due to your *shadow jaunt* racial power, you can push that enemy up to 2 squares. The enemy then becomes slowed until the end of its next turn.

Drowning of Nhalloth

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, *shadow jaunt* racial power

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Arcana checks.

When you hit an enemy with an attack while you are insubstantial due to your *shadow jaunt* racial power, you can slide that enemy 1 square. The enemy then takes a -2penalty to attack rolls until the end of its next turn.

Ghostly Wind

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, *shadow jaunt* racial power

Benefit: If you spend your second wind while your *shadow jaunt* power remains unexpended, you gain insubstantial until the start of your next turn.

Krinth Heritage [Shadar-Kai Bloodline]

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, *shadow jaunt* racial power

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Intimidate checks.

Immediately after an enemy scores a critical hit against you, you become insubstantial until the end of your next turn.

Replace your *shadow jaunt* racial power with the *demonic aggression* power.

Demonic Aggression — **Shadar-kai Attack**

Once your ire is raised, your demonic heritage rages out of control.
Encounter ✦ Teleportation
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: An enemy within 3 squares of you damages you with an attack.
Effect: Teleport to any unoccupied square adjacent to the triggering enemy. You gain combat advantage against that enemy until the end of your next turn.

Shade Heritage [Shadar-kai Bloodline]

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, *shadow jaunt* racial power

Benefit: You gain a +2 feat bonus to Stealth checks.

You gain darkvision 5.

Replace your *shadow jaunt* racial power with the *shade stride* power.

Shade Stride — **Shadar-kai Utility**

Shadows swirl up around you and speed you to safety.

Encounter ✦ Teleportation

Move Action **Personal**

Effect: You teleport up to 5 squares. If you are within 10 squares of a square of darkness or that is dimly lit, you can instead teleport to that square.

Shadow Exile

Prerequisite: Shadar-kai, *shadow jaunt* racial power

Benefit: When you use your *shadow jaunt* power, you can choose to remove yourself from play rather than teleporting. If so, you return to the square you last occupied or the nearest unoccupied square to that square at the start of your next turn.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed over one hundred roleplaying game titles for Dungeons & Dragons, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire* RPG, *Star Wars RPG*, and the d20 system. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Player's Handbook 3*, *Martial Power 2*, and *Draconomicon 2: Metallic Dragons*. In addition, he's a regular contributor to both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives, works, and will probably die in Tennessee. For a window into Robert's head, be sure to check out www.robertjschwalb.com.

Assassin, Executioner

A Player's Essentials Playtest Class

Illustration by Eric Belisle

The hired killer is one of the most feared enemies to walk the streets of any society. While any mercenary can perform a paid killing in a dark alley, only the executioner assassin can make it mean something. For an executioner, the act of killing isn't as important as the message it sends, and any assassination is a calculated event meant to accomplish some goal.

Executioners are more than just assassins for hire. When someone wants to send a message with an assassination, an executioner arranges the death in such a way that the message is sent with maximum effectiveness. This might mean the quiet poisoning of a merchant in his home to warn other merchants to get out of town, or it could be a very public execution of a local nobleman, meant to frighten the populace into accepting another noble house's leadership. While many executioners perform these deeds at the request of a third party, other assassins might do what they do in order to accomplish personal goals, such as bringing down a tyrant or stopping an extra-planar invasion.

Martial and Shadow Striker: Your sense of timing, skill with weapons, and ability to use the shadows as a second home allow you to strike with devastating effect against an unsuspecting foe. You even mix in some shadow magic when appropriate.

Why This Is the Class for You: You want to play a stealthy character that can grievously wound enemies with a single blow and who dabbles in both poison and shadow magic.

Key Abilities: Dexterity, Charisma

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Executioners rely on their effectiveness as both infiltrators and assassins to get the job done. They dabble in shadow magic, which lets them walk through walls, create artificial shadows, and craft illusions to hide their intrusion into secure areas. They also master the art of poison use, giving them the ability to strike at enemies both directly and indirectly.

Adventuring executioners tend to perform their assassinations in the pursuit of the goals of their fellow adventurers, using such killings to influence both the party's allies and enemies. An executioner might break into the keep belonging to an enemy general to assassinate him in his sleep. Likewise, an executioner is a capable warrior even when not performing an assassination, making him an invaluable member of an adventuring party that finds itself frequently in conflict.

Creating an Executioner Assassin

This section walks you through the steps of creating an executioner assassin: (1) ability scores, (2) race, (3) skills, (4) class features and powers, (5) feats, (6) armor and weapons, and (7) defenses and hit points. As you make choices at each step, consider how those choices relate to your character's personality, history, and goals.

Consult this chapter's three executioner assassin tables—one for each tier of play—for a summary of what you gain as you advance in level.

Hit Points: 12 + Constitution score + 5 for each level after 1st
Healing Surges per Day: 7 + Constitution modifier
Armor Proficiencies: Cloth, leather; light shield
Weapon Proficiencies: Simple one-handed melee, simple ranged, military one-handed melee, shortbow
Class Skills: Acrobatics (Dex), Arcana (Int), Athletics (Str), Bluff (Cha), Endurance (Con), Insight (Wis), Perception (Wis), Stealth (Dex), Streetwise (Cha), Thievery (Dex).

1. Ability Scores

Determine your ability scores, keeping in mind that an executioner assassin is best served by a superior Dexterity score. You use Dexterity to make your weapon attacks; a steady hand and quick reflexes help you exploit an enemy's weaknesses. Because you rely on stealth to evade guards and other obstacles, you also need a good Dexterity to boost your AC and skill checks. Likewise, Charisma helps you deceive and distract your foes. The Bluff and Streetwise skills in particular can be crucial when you must throw an enemy off your trail.

Two ability scores of your choice increase by 1 when you reach certain levels: 4th, 8th, 14th, 18th, 24th, and 28th. In addition, all your ability scores increase by 1 at 11th and 21st levels.

Your other ability scores can help shape your character's background and interests. If you have a solid Strength score, you are likely the kind of assassin that leaps from rooftop to rooftop, clambers over walls, and uses your physical ability to get close to your foes. If you have a good Wisdom score, you might instead be a more thoughtful and studious executioner, one who likes to spend hours and days studying a target before striking with lethal precision.

Assassin: Beta

The Assassin class is exclusive to *D&D Insider*. This time around, we bring you the revamped assassin in Dungeons & Dragons® Essentials style. This version doesn't replace the assassin from *Dragon* 379; it's a different take on this iconic class with an Essentials approach.

What we're offering here is the playtest version of the assassin. You're looking at something that's still being worked on by our designers, developers, and editors. This article presents a single build for the assassin—the executioner—from 1st to 30th level.

We're also asking for your feedback. If you have comments on the assassin, please send them to dndinsider@wizards.com. Include the subject "Assassin Feedback" in the subject line, and be specific! If your comments are along the lines of "I just don't like it" or "I think it's great," that won't help us make this class the best it can be. The more specific you are in your comments, the better.

We'll present the final version of the assassin executioner in November, when we've had a chance to analyze all the commentary and feedback. So dig deep, tap that inner game designer, and let us know how the assassin plays out in your campaign!

2. Race

Choose your race; drow and human make good choices for an executioner assassin.

Drow

Perhaps no race is more perfectly suited for the role of executioner than the drow. Not only do their racial bonuses to Dexterity and Charisma match the executioner's ability score preferences, their *cloud of darkness* racial power is extremely useful in sowing confusion, providing cover for their ill deeds, and warding off interference. Additionally, their racial bonuses to both Intimidate and Stealth can provide the executioner with the ability to bully people out of his or her way or avoid them entirely.

As a drow assassin, you can let your experience in the Underdark guide the way in which you perform your duties as an executioner. You might prefer to stick to the shadows, leaving public assassinations to others. You might only work at night, giving you an advantage over the surface-dwelling races that are all but blinded by the darkness. Furthermore, you probably have some experience in the cutthroat world of drow politics, so you might tend to seek out execution targets with significant political strength or whose death could serve as the trigger for a significant shift in political power.

Drow assassins often worship the Raven Queen, the goddess of death. Executioners directly serve the Raven Queen every time they perform an assassination by sending more souls into her domain. Many even believe that they are the Raven Queen's weapons in the world and that she moves them around like playing pieces on a game board. Other drow executioners worship Sehanine for her connection to the moon and nighttime, the time when executioners flourish.

Human

Human executioners are among the most common assassins in existence, both because of the sheer number of humans in the world as well as the versatility which humans display (a trait executioners need to succeed and survive). Use the human ability score bonus to boost Dexterity. The extra skill is useful for expanding the scope of your talents; training in Bluff may get you past the gate guards, or Thievery might disable traps on the magistrate's windows.

When you play a human executioner, consider how your race's penchant for versatility and ambition played into your decision to become an assassin. Perhaps you were recruited at a young age as an orphan snatched off the street by a guild of assassins and given training in a wide variety of weapons and assassination techniques. Alternatively, you may have been a simple thug who dabbled in shadow magic or the use of poisons before eventually finding yourself far more dangerous than you imagined and were wooed into an assassins' guild with promises of wealth and power. Maybe you simply saw a way to put your talent for killing to good use and began advancing through the ranks of your assassins' guild with your eyes set on the position of the grandfather assassin.

Human executioners are usually adherents of the Raven Queen, guided to do her bidding through the touch of shadow magic they possess. Some human executioners worship Erathis, particularly her aspect of civilization; these rare executioners turn their weapons on any who threaten the strength of a civilization, such as insurgents and rebels who try to break the bonds of society.

3. Skills

At 1st level, you become trained in Stealth and choose four trained skills from the following list of class skills: Acrobatics (Dex), Arcana (Int), Athletics (Str), Bluff (Cha), Endurance (Con), Insight (Wis), Perception (Wis), Streetwise (Cha), Thievery (Dex).

For an executioner, each skill is a tool that can be used when the time is right. Executioners have many different skill needs depending on the situation. Sometimes they need to be secretive and silent, while at other times they need to be cunning and street savvy. It benefits an executioner to have a wide range of skills so that any situation can be dealt with swiftly without disrupting the plan.

Your skills help describe the kinds of training you received and your preferred assassination methods. An executioner trained in Acrobatics and Athletics might have spent his formative years dashing across rooftops and may now specialize in "second story" intrusions and assassinations in a target's home or resting place. Alternatively, an executioner trained in Bluff and Streetwise might be a master of blending in. Such assassins spend years learning the mannerisms and habits of a variety of different cultures so that they can range far and wide in the pursuit of a target.

4. Class Features and Powers

Note which class features and powers you gain at 1st level, as specified in the "Class Features and Powers" section below.

5. Feats

Choose one feat at 1st level (see *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* chapter 7). You gain an additional feat at every even-numbered level, plus a feat at 11th and 21st levels.

Feats from the quick reaction group are a good choice for reflecting the executioner's ability to react and move quickly in any unexpected situation. Similarly, feats from the weapon training group can give the assassin an edge in combat. Assassins prefer melee weapons and weapons that can be easily used at close range, where they are most effective. Because executioner assassins can use shields, consider taking the expertise feat that applies to a one-handed weapon, like a dagger (light blades) or the javelin (spears).

Additionally, many executioners have minds as keen as their blades and spend a great deal of time studying and practicing their abilities. Consider taking feats from the learning and lore group, particularly those that enhance Athletics, Bluff, and Stealth, all of which can be extremely useful to executioners.

6. Armor and Weapons

You have proficiency with the following types of armor: cloth, leather, and light shields. As for weapons, you have proficiency with the following types: simple one-handed melee, military one-handed melee, simple ranged, shortbow.

You start with 100 gp to buy your starting equipment. Begin by purchasing a poisoner's kit, which you will need to create the poisons you use. Next, buy a suit of leather armor and a light shield, and a one-handed weapon. A dagger is a good choice for a melee weapon because it is small, easy to conceal, and lightweight. A spear is also a good choice for an executioner who does not need to hide his weapon, since its larger damage die will make you a bit more dangerous. Likewise, be sure to purchase one of each of your guild weapons associated with the guild weapon techniques you choose.

7. Defenses and Hit Points

Calculate your defenses, accounting for the armor you purchased and the +1 bonus to Fortitude and Will that guild assassins gain.

As for hit points, you start with a number equal to 12 + your Constitution score. You gain 5 more hit points each time you gain a level.

8. Alignment and Final Details

At this point, you should have determined all the mechanical details of your character. There are only a few more decisions to make.

Pick an alignment, which represents a basic outlook on the world that helps shape how your character acts. Do you execute only those who are perpetrating evil on the world? If so, lawful good or good is the best match for your character. If you perform executions only to serve your own needs and wants, then unaligned is a good choice.

Finally, check with your DM to see where you are from in the campaign setting, the people you already know, and what your current situation is. It also helps to spend a few minutes working out how or if you know the other players' characters.

EXECUTIONER ASSASSIN HEROIC TIER

XP	LVL	Feats	Benefits
0	1	1	+1 Fortitude, +1 Will 4 trained skills Assassin's guild Assassin's strike Attack finesse Guild weapon attacks Poison use Quick swap
1,000	2	+1	Utility power
2,250	3	–	Death attack (10 hp)
3,750	4	+1	Ability score increase Nimble drop
5,500	5	–	Effective poisoner
7,500	6	+1	Utility power
10,000	7	–	Guild weapon training
13,000	8	+1	Ability score increase Flawless disguise
16,500	9	–	Master poisoner
20,500	10	+1	Utility power

Class Features and Powers

The following class features and powers form the backbone of the executioner assassin.

Level 1: Attack Finesse

For the executioner, speed, agility, and precision are more important than muscle. An executioner learns how to handle any weapon with a finesse that lends itself to more accurate strikes.

Benefit: You can use Dexterity instead of Strength for melee basic attacks. Additionally, you deal 1d6 extra damage with weapon attacks.

Level 1: Quick Swap

Your weapons are extensions of your body. When changing your focus from nearby foes to distant enemies, you can switch between your melee and ranged weapons with ease.

Benefit: Once during each of your turns, you can draw or stow a weapon and draw another weapon as a free action instead of a minor action.

Level 1: Assassin's Guild

When you create your assassin, you must choose which guild you belong to. The executioner assassin has a choice between the Red Scales and the League of Whispers, though your Dungeon Master may substitute his or her own guild names and descriptions for these. Your choice of guild determines some of your weapon proficiencies and the kinds of special attack techniques you will learn throughout your career.

Assassin Tools

All assassins have certain tools of their trade that they specialize in. Below are several weapons and a new trade kit for use with the executioner assassin.

Blowgun: This long, tubular weapon is used by blowing on one end. It can launch darts and other agents.

Bolas: Consisting of two or three weighted spheres connected by cord, bolas tangle up opponents, but the spheres are also strong enough to inflict injuries.

Garrote: This strangling tool is a length of wire or knotted rope with handles at either end. Someone proficient with the garrote can use it to deal damage as part of a grab attack.

Kukri: The blade of this heavy knife curves forward for greater potency. A rogue proficient with the kukri can treat it as a dagger for the purpose of the Rogue Weapon Talent class feature.

Shuriken: This small blade resembles either a multi-pointed star or a long, slender blade. It is designed specifically to be thrown.

Poisoner's Kit: The poisoner's kit is an essential part of the assassin's repertoire. It contains the base components and tools needed to craft poisons. Cost: 10 gp. Weight: 1 lb.

SUPERIOR MELEE WEAPONS

Weapon	Prof.	Damage	Range	Price	Weight	Prop.	Group
One-Handed Kukri	+2	1d6	-	10 gp	2 lb	B1, O	Light blade
Two-Handed Garrote	+3	1d4	-	1 gp	1 lb	HC, S	Garrote

SUPERIOR RANGED WEAPONS

Weapon	Prof.	Damage	Range	Price	Weight	Prop.	Group
One-Handed Bola	+3	1d4	4/8	5 gp	2 lb	LT	Flail
Shuriken	+3	1d4	6/12	2 sp	.1 lb	LT	Light blade
Two-Handed Blowgun	+3	1d4	5/10	5 gp	2 lb	LM, S	Blowgun

The Red Scales

The Red Scales are an order of assassins who work to keep society in balance. If any organization grows too powerful, too corrupt, too wealthy, or too vile, the Red Scales weigh and measure the members of that organization and then collect a payment that they are owed in blood. Though one might be tempted to call the Red Scales idealists, none can say what truly drives them. Rumors abound that this guild's Grandfather of Assassins is touched by some planar entity. They say that his eyes are orbs of golden fire, a feature he gained, along with his new policies, only after he returned from a journey to the distant East.

Benefit: Your assassin's guild weapons are the dagger, garrote, javelin, kukri, and unarmed attacks. You gain proficiency in all of these weapons.

League of Whispers

The League of Whispers is a guild of executioners for hire whose very existence is often dismissed as myth or urban legend. The League of Whispers keeps its membership a secret. While individual members might be known as assassins, their association with the guild is rarely more than a matter of speculation for nonmembers. The League keeps its existence a mystery by executing anyone who discovers the truth. The order holds secret meetings once every full moon, where the members converge to discuss jobs, trade secrets and tricks, and receive orders from their Grandfather of Assassins.

Benefit: Your assassin's guild weapons are the blowgun, bolas, hand crossbow, and shuriken. You gain proficiency in all of these weapons.

Level 1: Assassin's Strike

The heart of the executioner's ability to take down a foe is the powerful *assassin's strike* technique. The executioner often has only one chance to eliminate an enemy. Once the element of surprise is lost, bodyguards (or even the targets themselves, if capable) can interfere with the mission, leaving the target regretfully alive. This powerful technique represents the intersection of the assassin's knowledge of vital areas of the body, the assassin's extreme mastery of weapons, and their ability to throw everything they have into a single, devastating attack. The executioner must wait for the exact right moment to strike, but when he does, the attack is so devastating that it can slay a target instantly.

Benefit: You gain the *assassin's strike* power.

Assassin's Strike — **Assassin Attack**

You strike with precision at the exact right moment, landing an attack against a vital area which can be instantly fatal.

Encounter ✦ Martial, Weapon
Special: Any time an effect would allow you to regain the use of an encounter attack power, you cannot choose this power to regain.
Free Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You hit an enemy within 5 squares of you with an attack using a weapon.
Target: The enemy you hit.
Effect: The target takes 1d10 extra damage from the triggering attack.
Level 3: 2d10 extra damage.
Level 7: 3d10 extra damage.
Level 13: 4d10 extra damage.
Level 17: 5d10 extra damage.
Level 23: 6d10 extra damage.
Level 27: 7d10 extra damage.
Special: If the target is helpless, this power inflicts maximum damage.

Level 1: Ki Focus

Assassins focus their shadow energy through a ki focus, which is not an object they wield but a reservoir of magical power within themselves. When using a ki focus, an assassin taps into the power of shadow magic and channels it into both implement and weapon attacks.

You can imbue your ki focus with magic as if it were a physical weapon. When you have a magic ki focus, you can add its enhancement bonus to the attack rolls and the damage rolls of any weapon attack you make using a weapon with which you're proficient.

If you have a magic ki focus and wield a magic weapon, you choose before you use an attack power whether to draw on the magic of your ki focus or to employ the magic of your weapon. Your choice determines which enhancement bonus, critical hit effects, and magic item properties and powers you can apply to attacks with that power. You can't, for example, use the enhancement bonus of your ki focus and the property of your magic weapon with the same attack power.

Level 1: Guild Weapon Attacks (The Red Scales)

The Red Scales are considered by many to be the masters of close-quarters combat. The techniques that their guild members learn combine decades of study of both martial arts and common assassination techniques, giving them an edge both when unarmed and when using a garrote, kukri, or javelin.

Benefit: You gain two of the following weapon attacks.

Garrote Strangle

The garrote is a favorite weapon for silent executions. It gives the assassin a silent and efficient weapon for use on the unsuspecting. Though it is difficult to use a garrote on someone that is aware of its presence, assassins have been known to lie in wait for just the right moment when their target wanders too close, then reach out to strangle the target with the garrote before he or she can react.

Garrote Strangle — **Assassin Attack**

You wait for the perfect moment when your foe is within reach, then strangle the foe with your garrote.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action — **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a garrote and make the following attack with it.
Effect: Shift 2 squares.
Target: One creature you are hidden from.
Attack: Dexterity vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Dexterity modifier damage, and you grab the target. The target takes a –4 penalty to escape checks to escape this grab, and the target cannot speak, shout, or make other vocalizations as long as it is grabbed.
Level 21: 3[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.
Sustain Standard: 2[W] + Dexterity modifier damage, and you sustain the grab. You can only sustain this power if the target is still grabbed by you.
Level 21: 3[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.

Kukri Lunge

The kukri is a weighted blade that is heavier near its tip than near the handle. Assassins often use the kukri to deliver a powerful attack by swinging the blade and snapping the wrist at the last second so that the kukri's unique balance adds speed to the blade as it strikes. When combined with the momentum of a charge, the kukri can be as devastating as a greatsword, yet it is small enough to slip up a sleeve or down into a boot, out of sight.

Kukri Lunge — **Assassin Attack**

You charge toward your foe, using your momentum and the weight of the kukri's blade to deliver a powerful blow.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a kukri and make the following attack with it instead of a melee basic attack when you charge.
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.
Level 21: 3[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.

Unarmed Throw

The principles of unarmed combat can serve an assassin well when he or she is disarmed or cornered. This particular throwing technique allows the executioner to leverage an opponent's size and strength against them, creating momentum with a gentle tug and then hurling the target several feet, using their own body as the axis around which their enemy's body flies.

Unarmed Throw — **Assassin Attack**

You grab your foe, and only moments later, their body flies through the air to land where you threw them.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be unarmed.
Target: One creature.
Attack: Dexterity vs. AC
Hit: You push the target 1 square and knock it prone.

Unseen Spearhead

The javelin is an often-overlooked weapon that can be hidden along the back in the folds of an assassin's clothes, yet it has a long, sturdy shaft which can be used to restrain an enemy. This particular technique allows the executioner to sneak up on an enemy and use the shaft of the javelin to grab and strangle their foe. Once the target is secured, the javelin is pulled away and then driven through the target's back.

Unseen Spearhead — **Assassin Attack**

You use the shaft of your javelin to restrain your enemy and set them up for a subsequent attack against a vital area.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a spear or javelin and make the following attack with it.
Effect: Shift 2 squares to a square adjacent to the target.
Target: One creature you are hidden from.
Attack: Dexterity vs. AC
Hit: You grab the target. If you are still grabbing the target at the start of your next turn, you treat the target as helpless for as long as you continue to grab the target.

Level 1: Guild Weapon Attacks (League of Whispers)

Members of the League of Whispers specialize in the use of a variety of ranged weapons which allow them to perform special tricks that can help them execute a target or escape the local authorities. All members of the League undergo training with bolas, hand crossbows, blowguns, and shuriken to give them an edge against enemies both near and far. Like other executioners, members of the League of Whispers are trained in the use of multiple weapons and usually carry a variety of weapons with which they are skilled.

Benefit: You gain two of the following weapon attacks.

Bolas Takedown

The proper application of bolas can bring down even the most nimble of enemies. Executioners frequently use bolas to keep their targets from escaping, as most creatures tend to flee from their killers on sight. However, this particular technique, which uses a specialized throwing motion to ensure maximized extension of the weapon, is also sometimes used to trip up pursuit when fleeing from the scene of an execution.

Bolas Takedown — **Assassin Attack**

You whirl your bolas over your head and take careful aim before hurling them at a foe's legs.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding bolas and make the following attack with it.
Target: One creature.
Attack: Dexterity vs. AC
Hit: The target is knocked prone and immobilized until the end of your next turn.

Close-Quarters Shot

The hand crossbow is one of the great equalizers when it comes to lethal ranged combat. Executioners often prefer to do most of their assassinations up close, which can sometimes bring the assassin too close to other enemies. This particular quick-fire technique uses the hand crossbow to surprise and stagger nearby enemies long enough for the executioner to escape.

Close-Quarters Shot **Assassin Attack**

You loose a quick bolt from your crossbow, thereby creating a momentary opening for your escape.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a hand crossbow and make the following attack with it.
Special: This attack does not provoke opportunity attacks.
Target: One adjacent creature.
Attack: Dexterity vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.
Level 21: 2[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.
Effect: You shift 2 squares.

Precision Dart

Though one of the weaker weapons in the executioner's repertoire, the blowgun is an excellent tool for ensuring that a poison is delivered directly to an opponent and not turned aside by armor which can deflect a dagger. This technique gives you pinpoint accuracy with the blowgun. A well-placed dart can even be lethal to weaker foes if it punctures a vital area.

Precision Dart **Assassin Attack**

The poisoned dart flies from your blowgun with unerring accuracy.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a blowgun and make the following attack with it.
Target: One creature.
Attack: Dexterity + 4 vs. Reflex
Hit: Dexterity modifier damage. If you deliver a poison with this attack, the target automatically fails its first saving throw against its effect, if any.

Unerring Shuriken

One of the great advantages of the shuriken is that it can be drawn and thrown very quickly, allowing an assassin to strike with surprising speed. This technique allows you to launch a shuriken at a foe before moving into attack position or slipping away into the shadows.

Unerring Shuriken **Assassin Attack**

With a flick of the wrist, you hurl a shuriken at an enemy who thinks your attacks have abated, catching them by surprise.

At-Will ✦ Martial, Weapon
Standard Action **Ranged** weapon
Requirement: You must be wielding a shuriken and make the following attack with it.
Target: One creature.
Attack: Dexterity vs. AC
Hit: 2[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.
Level 21: 4[W] + Dexterity modifier damage.
Effect: You can move up to your speed.

Level 1: Poison Use

One of the most powerful tools used by executioners is poison. Executioners have a long history with poison. All become masters at mixing their own poisons. For most assassins, poison is only one of many weapons. Most of the poisons used by executioners are merely the set-up for a later attack, a precursor to ensure that the target won't be able to stop the executioner once the assassination attempt begins in earnest.

Many poisons are outlawed in civilized realms, so executioners learn to craft simple, unstable venoms that quickly break down into inert components. In this manner, an assassin can travel with a seemingly innocent array of materials. When it is time to strike, the executioner quickly crafts a poison as needed. Because the poison is unstable, it will decay rapidly and leave no incriminating evidence if unused. A canny executioner can maintain an innocent façade even in the face of a thorough search of his person and quarters. When an executioner needs a truly deadly poison, such as one that causes instant death, he is best off purchasing it from a trusted source.

Benefit: During an extended rest, you can create one vial of a 1st-level assassin poison. You must know the poison's recipe and possess an assassin's kit in order to create it. This vial contains a single use of the poison and lasts until you take another extended rest. You must have a poisoner's kit to produce a vial of poison. A single weapon or piece of ammunition can benefit from the effects of only one assassin poison at a time. You are immune to the effects of poisons you create.

Additionally, you learn two of the 1st-level assassin poison recipes from the list below.

Bloodroot Poison

The poison created from the oils of the bloodroot plant causes a temporary fever and weakening of the body. Bloodroot (named for the deep crimson color of the root) is a relatively common plant which is often mistaken for other, harmless plants which grow nearby. The poison is favored by assassins who seek to knock an enemy off-balance and disorient the target before the lethal strike.

Bloodroot Poison **Level 1**

This crimson liquid causes fever and disorientation.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the bloodroot poison to your weapon or one piece of ammunition. The first creature you hit with a weapon attack using that weapon or ammunition before you take a short rest takes an extra 5 poison damage and is dazed (save ends).

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Pour the bloodroot poison into a drink or onto a plate of food. The first creature to consume the food or drink is dazed until it takes an extended rest.

Carrion Crawler Brain Juice

Carrion crawler brain juice is exactly what its name claims it is: a poison derived from the brains of vicious carrion crawlers, which makes it a difficult poison to harvest. Carrion crawler brain juice makes the body of the target sluggish as the poison attacks muscles and essential tissues which help the body move. Longer exposure to the brain juice causes a form of paralysis that makes it impossible for the victim to move a significant distance.

Carrion Crawler Brain Juice Poison **Level 1**

Purple, oily carrion crawler brain juice can cause sluggishness and paralysis.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the carrion crawler brain juice poison to your weapon or one piece of ammunition. Until the end of the encounter, whenever you hit a creature with a weapon attack using that weapon or ammunition, the target takes an extra 2 poison damage and is slowed until the end of your next turn.

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the carrion crawler brain juice to a single handheld object. The first creature other than you to hold or wear the object for more than 1 minute is immobilized until it takes an extended rest.

Greenblood Oil

Named for its color and thickness, greenblood oil is a viscous poison derived from poisonous plants that grow deep in primeval forests. This combination of oils from several different plants has medicinal uses: it breaks up dangerous blood clots and can be used to help drain infections from the body. Assassins, however, use greenblood oil to make it more difficult for the body to heal. Greenblood oil is often used to make a target more vulnerable to harm rather than by harming directly. For example, an assassin might pour greenblood oil over an enemy's food early in the day before a very public assassination, to ensure that the target cannot be magically healed once the attack takes place.

Greenblood Oil Poison **Level 1**

This thick, green oil has the consistency of blood and makes enemies more susceptible to grievous injuries.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the greenblood oil to your weapon or one piece of ammunition. The first enemy you hit with a weapon attack using that weapon or ammunition before you take a short rest takes an extra 10 poison damage and cannot regain hit points or gain temporary hit points (save ends).

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Pour the greenblood oil into a drink or onto a plate of food. The first creature to consume the food or drink takes a –4 penalty to saving throws and cannot regain hit points or gain temporary hit points until it takes an extended rest.

Id Moss Powder

Id moss primarily grows in caves and crevasses in the earth, particularly in places where the sun never reaches. Most forest-dwelling people know to avoid consuming id moss even in desperate situations, because the moss causes mental trauma and eventually insanity. When crushed into a fine powder, the id moss can be inhaled, allowing it to attack the mind more quickly.

Id Moss Powder **Level 1**

This green powder causes mental anguish and eventually insanity.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison, Psychic): Standard Action.
Effect: Make the following attack:
Ranged 5
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity vs. Reflex
Special: You can add your enhancement bonus from your ki focus to the following attack and damage rolls.
Hit: 2d10 + Dexterity modifier poison damage and ongoing 5 psychic damage (save ends).
Each Failed Saving Throw: The target makes a basic attack against its nearest ally.
Miss: Half damage and ongoing 5 psychic damage (save ends).
Special: A creature reduced to 0 hit points by this poison does not die, but instead is driven permanently insane.

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Standard Action. Place the id moss powder in a closed container, such as a chest or a jewelry box. The first creature to open the container takes 2d10 + Dexterity modifier poison damage and ongoing 10 psychic damage (save ends). A creature reduced to 0 hit points by this poison does not die, but instead is driven permanently insane.

Nitharit Poison

One of the few slow-acting poisons in the assassin's repertoire, nitharit poison gradually breaks down a creature's natural defenses against toxins and eventually turns those defenses against the poisoned creature. Nitharit poison is often used as a precursor poison to weaken a target before a second poisoned assault. For example, an assassin might put nitharit poison in a magistrate's wine, then later in the evening return to finish the job with a stronger poison once the magistrate's body is in no shape to fight it off.

Nitharit Poison **Level 1**

This clear, odorless, tasteless liquid slowly turns a creature's natural defenses against poison into a harmful weapon.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the nitharit poison to your weapon or one piece of ammunition. Until the end of the encounter, whenever you hit a creature with a weapon attack using that weapon or ammunition, the target takes ongoing 2 poison damage (save ends).
First Failed Saving Throw: The enemy instead takes ongoing 5 poison damage (save ends).

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the nitharit poison to a single handheld object. The first creature other than you to hold or wear the object for more than 1 minute gains vulnerable 5 poison and loses all poison immunity or resistance until it takes an extended rest.

Crippling Poisons

Several of the poisons described here have special effects which begin with "If this attack reduces the target to 0 hit points, the target is not killed but is instead knocked unconscious and ..."

These are discretionary effects in that they call for some interpretation by the players and the DM. For example, id moss powder causes 'permanent insanity'. We don't define what that means; it's up to you. You may decide that either (or both) the target's Intelligence and Wisdom scores drop to 1 with no hope of recovery, or that it regains its former mental capacity but is forever twisted in some psychotic way. Likewise, the extent of the 'visible scarring' caused by ungol dust is open to interpretation. Do the scars cover the victim's whole body or only its face? Do they affect Charisma?

All of this assumes, of course, that the assassin leaves the target alive at 0 hit points rather than just finishing it off.

If these poisons are ever used against fellow player characters, the DM should consider allowing the 'permanent' effects to be removed through quests, long-lost rituals, or some other difficult but adventurous process.

Ungol Dust

Ungol dust is a black powder made of the crushed remains of dried-up spiders and scorpions which is so fine that one errant breath can blow away an entire dose. Most of those who craft this poison wear masks to ensure that they do not accidentally disperse—or inhale—the ungol dust before packing it into small, easily shattered pellets. When ungol dust comes into contact with flesh or other living material, it becomes highly corrosive.

Ungol Dust **Level 1**

This black powder dissolves organic material.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Acid, Poison): Standard Action.
Effect: Make the following attack:
Ranged 5
Target: One creature
Special: You can add your enhancement bonus from your ki focus to the following attack and damage rolls.
Attack: Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 3d10 + Dexterity modifier poison damage and ongoing 5 acid damage (save ends).
Miss: Half damage and ongoing 5 acid damage (save ends).
Special: If this attack reduces the target to 0 hit points, the target is not killed but is instead knocked unconscious and permanently and visibly scarred.

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Standard Action. Place the ungol dust in a closed container, such as a chest or a jewelry box. The first creature to open the container suffers 3d10 poison damage and ongoing 5 acid damage (save ends). If this damage reduces the target to 0 hit points, the target is not killed but is instead knocked unconscious and permanently and visibly scarred.

Level 2: Utility Power

Part of being an assassin is knowing which tool to use in every situation. Some executioners master the power of shadow magic early to gain a supernatural edge over their targets. Others simply refine their natural skills, pushing themselves to peak performance.

Benefit: You gain one of the following utility powers.

Distracting Illusion

Mastering the ability to weave shadow magic to create illusions can be a useful skill for the assassin who wants to focus on subterfuge and misdirection. The images created by *distracting illusion* won't fool anyone who examines them closely or interacts with them. Instead, these illusions are meant to cover up the assassin's actions. For example, an assassin might create an illusion of the guard that the assassin just killed, standing at his assigned post, in order to fool observers into thinking the guard is still on duty. Alternatively, an assassin might lure his or her quarry out into the open by creating an illusion of a trusted companion beckoning the target urgently to where the assassin lurks in the shadows.

Distracting Illusion **Assassin Utility 2**

The image of a creature flickers and then solidifies as you craft an illusion meant to cover your dark deeds.

Encounter ✦ Illusion, Shadow
Minor Action **Close** burst 10
Effect: You create the illusion of a Medium-sized creature of your choice in an unoccupied square in the burst. The illusion is silent but moves and acts as though it was the creature it appears to be. Creatures that closely examine the illusion can make an Insight check opposed by your Bluff check to discover the illusion for what it really is. The illusion lasts until the end of your next turn.
Sustain Minor: The effect persists until the end of your next turn, and you can move the illusion up to 6 squares.

Silent Stalker

You've learned to quiet your steps and keep your equipment from making noise. As soon as your enemies turn their backs on you, you can approach quickly and quietly, using your enemy's body to shield yourself from sight.

Silent Stalker **Assassin Utility 2**

You pad quietly toward your victim, unseen and unheard.

At-Will ✦ Martial
Move Action **Personal**
Requirement: You must be hidden.
Effect: Move up to your speed to a square within 2 squares of an enemy. You remain hidden until the end of your turn.

Summon the Mists

Summon the mists is a simple hex which provides rudimentary cover against observation. It allows you to call up a bank of fog which rolls out from the shadows to conceal your actions. When used properly, this hex usually draws little attention from observers because the fog appears to be perfectly natural even as it conceals dark deeds.

Summon the Mists **Assassin Utility 2**

A thick fog rises around you.

Daily ✦ Shadow, Zone
Minor Action **Close** burst 5
Effect: The burst creates a zone of lightly obscured squares that lasts until the end of the encounter.

Level 3: Death Attack

Executioners know how to ensure that the job gets done. You rarely leave your enemies on the brink of death and know how to drive your weapon just a little deeper to turn a grave wound into a killing blow.

Benefit: When you hit an enemy with a weapon attack that deals damage, if the target has 10 hit points or less after you deal damage, you can choose to automatically kill the target.

Level 4: Ability Score Increase

Your experience as an assassin makes you more deadly by the day.

Benefit: You increase two ability scores of your choice by 1.

Level 4: Nimble Drop

Whether high on the rooftops or lurking along the edge of a cliff, you often find yourself with hiding places that are perched upon great heights. You know how to soften a fall so that you can leap into action from your lofty perch.

Benefit: You gain the *nimble drop* power.

Nimble Drop — **Assassin Utility**

You cushion your fall with secret techniques that protect you even when dropping from a great height.

At-Will ✦ Martial
Free Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You take falling damage.
Effect: Reduce the falling damage by 10. If this reduces the falling damage to 0, you do not fall prone and instead land on your feet.
Level 11: Reduce the falling damage by 20.
Level 21: Reduce the falling damage by 40.

Level 5: Efficient Poisoner

Your confidence in your skills as a maker of poisons grows, as does your speed in doing so. Even when handling deadly toxins, your hand remains steady and your eye for mixtures gives you the ability to accomplish more in a short time.

Benefit: During an extended rest, you can create two vials of 1st-level assassin's poisons instead of just one. You also learn one more 1st-level assassin's poison recipe of your choice.

Level 6: Utility Power

You've learned to master more advanced assassination techniques ranging from improved skill in shadow magic to practical experience in staying out of sight.

Benefit: You gain one of the following utility powers.

Ghost of the Rooftops

Streets and alleyways are filled with city guards and other witnesses, so some executioners learn the art of dancing from rooftop to rooftop with speed and precision. For the executioner, clearing the distance between buildings or scaling a palace wall is like a stroll around the corner.

Ghost of the Rooftops — **Assassin Utility 6**

Your skill at climbing and leaping allows you to move across the rooftops unhindered.

At-Will ✦ Martial
Move Action — **Personal**
Effect: Climb a number of squares up to your speed, or jump horizontally a number of squares up to your speed.

Darkness

Not every execution can be performed with only your victim present. Bodyguards, servants, and innocent bystanders sometimes interfere with assassinations. The *darkness* hex allows you to sow confusion by creating an area of pure, magical darkness which no light can penetrate. Those in the *darkness* effect cannot see you performing your lethal task. Some executioners also use this hex to conceal their hiding places from outside observers; a well-placed *darkness* hex can block the light of lamps and candles, making a room in an inn appear dark to observers who might be hunting the assassin just outside the window.

Darkness — **Assassin Utility 6**

A cloud of pure shadow expands from you, shrouding the area in darkness.

Daily ✦ Shadow, Zone
Minor Action — **Close** burst 2
Effect: The area of the burst becomes a zone filled with darkness until the end of your next turn. The zone blocks line of sight for all creatures except you. Creatures in the zone other than you are blinded as long as they remain in the zone.
Sustain Minor: The effect persists until the end of your next turn. You must be within the zone to sustain it.

Vanish

A quick escape is one of the most valued tools in your repertoire. The *vanish* hex ensures that you can disappear without a trace, at least long enough to retreat without pursuit. This hex envelops you in a cloak of invisibility, then teleports you a short distance to make sure that your enemies are completely confounded.

Vanish — **Assassin Utility 6**

Without warning you completely vanish from the sight of all around you. By the time you reappear, you are far from where you once stood.

Encounter ✦ Shadow, Teleportation
Immediate Reaction **Personal**
Trigger: You are hit by an attack.
Effect: You become invisible until the start of your next turn. You teleport up to your speed.

Level 7: Guild Weapon Training

Versatility is the key to adapting to changing situations; nothing ever goes completely according to plan when it comes to assassination. You benefit from your ability to learn new techniques with your guild's favored weapons.

Benefit: You gain one additional guild weapon attack.

Level 8: Ability Score Increase

Your experience as an assassin makes you more deadly by the day.

Benefit: You increase two ability scores of your choice by 1.

Level 8: Flawless Disguise

Deception is a key part of the executioner's ability to reach his or her targets without impediment. Because infiltration is often necessary for gaining access to a target, executioners learn to disguise themselves well enough to blend in with their surroundings. You might disguise yourself as a servant to infiltrate the local lord's manor or appear as a merchant's cook to gain access to his dining chambers.

Benefit: During a short rest, you can craft an excellent disguise that makes you appear to be another humanoid of your size (either a specific person or a nondescript member of a race or organization). Any creature that attempts to see through your ruse makes an Insight check opposed by your Bluff check, and you gain a +5 bonus to your check. You must have a disguise kit to use this ability.

Level 9: Master Poisoner

The longer you work with your poisons, the more you learn about them. Whether you pick up the knowledge from a fellow assassin, pay a local apothecary for new instruction, or simply learn of new poisons by trial and error, your repertoire of poisons continues to grow.

Benefit: During an extended rest, you can create three vials of 1st-level assassin's poisons instead of two. You also learn one more 1st-level assassin's poison recipe.

Level 10: Utility Power

At the peak of your power in the heroic tier, your mastery of shadow magic gives you a variety of tools that you can use to perform your executions without being obstructed or captured.

Benefit: You gain one of the following utility powers.

Death Mark

Executioners often mark their targets in some way before the assassination occurs. The *death mark* hex creates a singed, black sigil somewhere on the target's body that pulses with shadow magic. This *death mark* creates a bond between the executioner and the target which gives the executioner the ability to detect the target with unerring accuracy. Once the *death mark* is placed, the assassin is rarely far behind, and both the target and bystanders know that death comes soon after.

Death Mark — **Assassin Utility 10**

A black mark appears on the target's form, appearing to be burned in with a hot iron. It warns of impending death.

Daily ✦ Shadow
Minor Action **Close** burst 5
Target: One creature in the burst
Effect: Until you take an extended rest, you always know the direction and approximate distance to the target. The target cannot become hidden from you and you can see the target even when it is invisible.

Eyes Unseen

A useful hex that has saved the lives of many an executioner, *eyes unseen* allows the user to peer through walls, around corners, and even through ceilings and floors to see what lies ahead. The hex creates a small, invisible sensor crafted by shadow magic that can appear within a small radius and pass visions back to the assassin. Many executioners use *eyes unseen* to search for guards, keep an eye on pursuers, and reveal traps and ambushes before walking into them.

Eyes Unseen — **Assassin Utility 10**

You conjure a sensor of shadow that appears nearby and which allows you to see through walls and other barriers.

Encounter ✦ Shadow
Minor Action **Close** burst 5
Target: One square
Special: You need not have line of effect or line of sight to the target square to use this power.
Effect: Until the end of your next turn, you can see and hear as though you were standing in the target square.

Walk Through Shadow

When you use *walk through shadow*, you create a brief, flickering shadow that whisks you quickly from one place to another. Unlike some other teleportation abilities, *walk through shadow* can take the user into unknown places and allows him or her to bypass walls, doors, and other barriers with a blind jump.

Walk Through Shadow **Assassin Utility 10**

A swirling mass of shadow surrounds you before transporting you instantaneously a short distance.

Encounter ✦ Shadow, Teleportation
Move Action **Personal**

Effect: You teleport a number of squares up to half your speed. You do not need line of sight to the square you teleport into. If you try to teleport into a square that you cannot occupy, this power has no effect.

Paragon Executioner

Executioners that reach the paragon tier have proven themselves more than capable of carrying out assassinations (both clandestine and public) without being caught or killed themselves. For you, simple political assassinations and hired killings begin to lose their luster, as city watchmen or the bodyguards of local merchants rarely challenge your skills. Your unique abilities are better spent stalking more powerful quarry—those that threaten the entire world, if not the planes themselves.

Paragon Path: Guild Executioner

At 11th level, your executioner takes on the guild executioner paragon path. As a member of a powerful guild, you are afforded training and education in the killing arts that surpasses those of most who work alone. You learn secret fighting techniques, gain access to experts in the field of poison use, and rise through the ranks of your guild as your skills progress. Perhaps one day you will even challenge the Grandfather of Assassins for control of the guild.

Prerequisite: Only an executioner can take this paragon path. You do have the option of selecting a different paragon path for which you qualify. If you do, you gain that path's benefits in place of the guild executioner benefits.

EXECUTIONER ASSASSIN (PARAGON TIER)

XP	LVL	Feats	Benefits
26,000	11	+1	Ability score increase Attack finesse Blindside [guild executioner] Devastating assassination [guild executioner] Executioner's action [guild executioner]
32,000	12	+1	Daring escape [guild executioner]
39,000	13	–	Death attack (20 hp) Shadow coffin
47,000	14	+1	Ability score increase
57,000	15	–	Advanced poisons
69,000	16	+1	Vital Strike [guild executioner] Untraceable step
83,000	17	–	Guild weapon training
99,000	18	+1	Ability score increase
119,000	19	–	Master poisoner
143,000	20	+1	Poisoner's secrets [guild executioner]

Level 11: Ability Score Increase

Your experience as an assassin makes you ever more deadly.

Benefit: You increase each of your ability scores by 1.

Level 11: Attack Finesse

The deftness with which you manipulate your weapons throws off enemy defenses, allowing you to plunge in your weapon for a deadly strike. More than ever before, your weapons flash before your enemies' eyes with uncanny speed.

Benefit: The damage bonus you receive from Attack Finesse increases to 2d6.

Level 11: Blindside

Guild executioner paragon path feature

A key skill taught to you by your guild is how to take advantage of the ignorance of your enemies. While hidden, you can remain so still that, when your strike comes, your enemies have no time to react or defend themselves. Though truly blindsiding your enemies is difficult (requiring them to move within striking distance of you without seeing you), good luck and a good hiding place can often make your assassinations easier than ever.

Benefit: If you are hidden at the start of an encounter, you gain a +4 bonus to your first attack roll.

Level 11: Devastating Assassination

Guild executioner paragon path feature
Your guild has taught you its secret techniques for executions. These secrets may be as simple as the angle of a blade or as complex as a long period of preparation before the execution takes place. Regardless of the actual form they take, these secrets increase the potency of your deadliest attack.

Benefit: When you use *assassin's strike*, increase the extra damage it provides by 2d10.

Level 11: Executioner's Action

Guild executioner paragon path feature
For you, the precise instant when your killing blow streaks toward your enemy's body seems to slow to a crawl. That crucial instant passes in the blink of an eye for your enemies and allies, but you perceive each moment in full clarity which lets you guide your strike to where it will do the most harm.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to make an attack and you roll a 1, 2, or 3 on any damage dice associated with that attack (including extra damage from *assassin's strike* or critical hit dice), treat those dice as though they showed a result of 4.

Level 12: Daring Escape

Guild executioner paragon path feature
When the kill is made, you need to be prepared to bolt away at a moment's notice. Your guild masters taught you a special slaying technique that uses the momentum of your last, deadly strike to propel yourself away. Before your enemies even know that their ally is dead, you are already speeding out of sight.

Benefit: You gain the *daring escape* power.

Daring Escape — **Guild Executioner Utility 12**

You carry the momentum of a killing blow into a rapid dash that leaves remaining other enemies far behind.

Encounter ✦ Martial
Free Action — **Personal**
Trigger: You reduce an enemy to 0 hit points.
Effect: You shift up to twice your speed. You gain a +5 power bonus to all Athletics checks made to climb and jump during that shift.

Level 13: Death Attack

Death comes swiftly to the wounded, and even more swiftly when you are involved. Your ability to end the life of a wounded enemy grows to the point where even those who don't yet feel truly endangered can fall to your attack.

Benefit: When you hit an enemy with a weapon attack that deals damage, if the target has 20 hit points or less after you deal damage, you can choose to automatically kill the target.

Level 13: Shadow Coffin

Those who hire executioners usually want proof of the target's death. The *shadow coffin* hex is an application of shadow magic that allows the executioner to bring back more than just a simple token of the assassination; it retrieves the entire body of the intended target. Even in situations where no proof of death is necessary, executioners may use *shadow coffin* to quickly and expertly dispose of inconvenient corpses. This is especially important when the authorities are investigating nearby.

Benefit: You gain the *shadow coffin* power.

Shadow Coffin — **Assassin Utility**

You trap the target of your assassination in a small object which keeps the body out of sight until you are ready to release it.

At-Will ✦ Shadow
Free Action — **Melee** 1
Trigger: You kill an adjacent enemy.
Effect: The enemy's body disappears and becomes trapped in a small, fragile object of your choice (such as a delicate goblet, a handheld mirror, a small gem, or a piece of jewelry). You can release the body into an adjacent square by breaking that object. You can have only one creature in a *shadow coffin* at a time.

Level 14: Ability Score Increase

Your experience as an assassin makes you ever more deadly.

Benefit: You increase two ability scores of your choice by 1.

Level 15: Advanced Poisons

As you gain greater experience in the wider world, you also come across rare substances that can enhance the effectiveness of your poisons. Through study and experimentation, you learn to create dangerous toxins that draw their potency from exotic creatures and plants.

Benefit: You learn one of the following 15th-level assassin's poison recipes. When preparing poisons, you can create two 1st-level poisons and one poison of up to 15th level.

Black Lotus Extract

This powder is derived from the legendary black lotus flower. The effect is devastating when it comes in contact with a creature for more than a few seconds. Black lotuses bloom only once every three years, and it is during that time that the flowers can be harvested to produce this toxic oil. Black lotuses grow only in deep swamps, along shadowed riverbanks, and at the edges of caves where they are sheltered from direct light.

Black Lotus Extract **Level 15**

This thick, poisonous oil is dark blue in color, though it quickly becomes invisible when applied to a weapon or object.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the black lotus extract to your weapon or one piece of ammunition. Until the end of the encounter, whenever you hit a creature with a weapon attack using that weapon or ammunition, the target takes an extra 5 poison damage.

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the black lotus extract to a single handheld object. The first creature other than you to hold or wear the object for more than 1 minute takes 40 poison damage.

Insanity Mist

Another poison designed to affect the mind as much as the body, insanity mist is a liquid that is only potent when made airborne and then inhaled. A liquid is distilled from the brains of mind flayer thralls (or mind flayers themselves, which produce a much higher quantity of poison) and combined with several kinds of mold spores to deliver the poison straight to the brain. Insanity mist attacks the mind of the target and begins eroding the consciousness of the victim almost instantly.

Insanity Mist **Level 15**

This deep purple liquid swirls with milky colors that sometimes seem to resolve into disturbing images.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison, Psychic): Standard Action.
Effect: Make the following attack:
Ranged 5
Target: One creature
Special: You can add your enhancement bonus from your ki focus to the following attack and damage rolls.
Attack: Dexterity vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d10 + Dexterity modifier poison damage and the target takes ongoing 10 psychic damage (save ends).
Miss: Half damage and ongoing 5 psychic damage (save ends).
Special: If this attack reduces the target to 0 hit points, the target is not killed but is instead driven permanently insane.

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Standard Action. Place the insanity mist in a closed container, such as a chest or a jewelry box. The first creature to open the container takes 2d10 poison damage and ongoing 10 psychic damage (save ends).

Lich Dust

To those uneducated in the art of poison crafting, lich dust is often believed to be a powder made from the ground-up bones of liches. This belief is only partially correct; in truth, lich dust is made from a combination of pulverized bones taken from a variety of undead creatures (liches among them) mixed with other alchemical and natural substances. Lich dust retains some of the necromantic power that once animated the bones it is made from, which can drain the energy and spirit of creatures that consume it or are injured by a weapon coated in the poison.

Lich Dust **Level 15**

This white powder looks to be the residue of ground-up bones.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the lich dust to your weapon or one piece of ammunition. The first creature you hit with a weapon attack using that weapon or ammunition before you take a short rest takes an extra 10 poison damage and is weakened (save ends).

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Pour the lich dust into a drink or onto a plate of food. The first creature to consume the food or drink is weakened until it takes an extended rest.

Level 16: Vital Strike

Guild executioner paragon path feature

In your pursuit of a greater ability to execute your targets quickly and efficiently, one of your fields of study is that of the anatomies of various types of creatures. More than just the study of natural races, you've learned where to strike demons to inflict the most damage, where the weak points of angels can be found, and where an archon's armor leaves tiny but dangerous gaps.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus to damage rolls against targets that you have combat advantage against.

Level 16: Untraceable Step

When you use *untraceable step*, you use the power of shadow magic to create a veil around yourself that hides you from the sight of others. This veil is short-lived, but it does not waver even when you perform strenuous activity. Many assassins use this hex as a means of both infiltration and escape, either slipping past the eyes of guards on the way to an assassination or vanishing from sight long enough to get free of the chaos that follows a killing.

Benefit: You gain the *untraceable step* power.

Untraceable Step — **Assassin Utility 16**

The air wavers for a moment before a veil of invisibility covers you from head to toe.

Encounter ✦ Shadow
Move Action **Personal**

Effect: You become invisible and move up to your speed. You remain invisible until the end of your next turn.

Level 17: Guild Weapon Training

Your practical experience in the field gives you new insight on how to use the weapons favored by your assassin guild.

Benefit: You gain one additional guild weapon attack.

Level 18: Ability Score Increase

Your experience as an assassin makes you ever more deadly.

Benefit: You increase two ability scores of your choice by 1.

Level 19: Master Poisoner

The longer you work with your poisons, the more you learn about them. Whether you pick up the knowledge from a fellow assassin, pay a local apothecary for new instruction, or simply learn of new poisons by trial and error, your repertoire of poisons continues to grow.

Benefit: You learn one additional assassin's poison recipe of up to 15th level. When preparing poisons, you can create two poisons of up to 15th level and one that is 1st level.

Level 20: Poisoner's Secrets

Guild executioner paragon path feature

When you reach the height of your power within your assassin's guild, you become privy to the secrets and mysteries that your guild's poison masters have held for many years. You not only learn the secret to crafting the deadly poison known as wyvern venom, you also learn how to mix your poisons more efficiently so that you can craft more poisons in the same amount of time.

Benefit: You learn the *wyvern poison* recipe. During an extended rest, you can create one more vial of *assassin's venom* in addition to those you can normally create during an extended rest. That poison can be up to 20th level.

Wyvern Venom

The secret to creating wyvern venom, a rare and potent poison, is closely guarded by the most powerful assassin guilds. Versatile in its application, wyvern venom not only does injury to a creature's body, it also rots away flesh and bone, melts sinew and boils the blood. Even after the initial shock of the effects of the wyvern venom is over, the pain and damage inflicted by the poison linger, making it difficult for the body to heal. The base of the poison is the venom from an actual wyvern, though the poison used by guild assassins is the result of a complex alchemical process that increases its potency tenfold.

Wyvern Venom — **Level 20**

This poison is far more dangerous than that delivered by the sting of a wyvern itself, as a result of the alchemical process that produces this inky-black liquid.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Necrotic, Poison): Minor Action. Apply the wyvern venom to your weapon or one piece of ammunition. The first creature you hit with a weapon attack using that weapon before you take a short rest takes an extra 25 necrotic and poison damage.

Power (Consumable ✦ Necrotic, Poison): Minor Action. Pour the wyvern venom into a drink or onto a plate of food. The first creature to consume the food or drink takes necrotic and poison equal to half of its bloodied value and cannot regain hit points until it takes an extended rest.

Power (Consumable ✦ Necrotic, Poison): Minor Action. Apply the wyvern venom to a single handheld object. The first creature other than you to hold or wear the object for more than 1 minute takes necrotic and poison damage equal to half of its bloodied value and cannot regain hit points until it takes an extended rest.

Epic Executioner

By the time you reach the epic tier, you are more than a simple killer for hire: you are among the greatest assassins to ever have lived. Elemental princes watch of their shoulders for a sign that you might be lurking in their shadows, and the very whisper of your name sends chills through the courts of the fey.

When your executioner reaches 21st level, he or she takes on an epic destiny of your choice. This epic destiny represents the grand finale of your adventuring career, and like your paragon path, it grants a set of related features and powers.

EXECUTIONER ASSASSIN (EPIC TIER)

XP	Level	Feats	Benefits
175,000	21	+1	Ability score increase Attack finesse Epic destiny feature
210,000	22	+1	Power
255,000	23	–	Death attack (30 hp)
310,000	24	+1	Ability score increase Epic destiny feature
375,000	25	–	Epic poisons
450,000	26	+1	Epic destiny power
550,000	27	–	Master poisoner
675,000	28	+1	Ability score increase
825,000	29	–	Master poisoner
1,000,000	30	+1	Epic destiny feature

Level 21: Ability Score Increase

Your experience as an assassin makes you more deadly by the day.

Benefit: You increase each of your ability scores by 1.

Level 21: Attack Finesse

Your skill in combat allows you to slip your weapon past your enemies' defenses with greater speed and efficiency. You move faster, react to defensive postures more quickly, and seek out weak points so quickly that your combat skills border on the supernatural.

Benefit: The damage bonus you receive from Attack Finesse increases to 3d6.

Level 21: Epic Destiny Feature

As you enter the epic tier, your final destiny comes into focus. Perhaps you are fated to save the world from some great evil, or maybe fate has dictated that you must fight against a god. The destiny you pursue shapes you just as your actions shape the cosmos.

Benefit: You gain a feature associated with your epic destiny.

Level 22: Ignore Barriers

Executioners often receive assignments to assassinate powerful individuals that cordon themselves off from the world behind walls of stone and gates of steel. The *ignore barriers* hex allows you to use shadow magic to cause walls, doors, and other objects to temporarily fade from existence when you approach them, allowing you to pass through barriers that would keep other creatures out.

Benefit: You gain the *ignore barriers* power.

Ignore Barriers — **Assassin Utility 22**

Your physical form becomes as unstable as a shadow, allowing you to step through physical barriers with ease.

Daily ✦ Shadow
Minor Action — **Personal**
Effect: You gain phasing until the end of the encounter.

Level 23: Death Attack

Your gift for executing the weak and dying allows you to put down creatures of greater power quickly and without a mess. Your attacks rarely leave your enemies at death's door; instead, they escort your enemies through that door into death's parlor.

Benefit: When you hit an enemy with a weapon attack that deals damage, if the target has 30 hit points or less after you deal damage you can choose to automatically kill the target.

Level 24: Ability Score Increase

Your experience as an assassin makes you more deadly by the day.

Benefit: You increase two ability scores of your choice by 1.

Level 24: Epic Destiny Feature

Your place in the cosmic order becomes cemented as you gain still more power. At this point, fate seems to bend and weave to ensure your survival.

Benefit: You gain a feature associated with your epic destiny.

Level 25: Epic Poisons

Like any other field of learning, the mastery of poisons comes only after a long period of practice and diligent studying. As you approach the apex of knowledge in the poisoning arts, you learn how to manipulate poisons extracted from the bodies of powerful beings, like angels, basilisks, and dragons.

Benefit: You learn one of the following 25th-level assassin's poison recipes. When preparing poisons, you can create one poison of up to 25th level and two of up to 15th level.

Dark Reaver Powder

Said to come from the pulverized bodies of angels devoted to gods of death (the Raven Queen, Kelemvor, etc.), dark reaver powder has the ability to render a creature unconscious for long periods of time. Assassins use dark reaver powder to get enemies out of the way without killing them or to leave them as long-term reminders not to cross the wrong person. When applied in powder form to a weapon, the poison seeps into the blood and produces a diluted effect that renders enemies woozy for a short period of time.

Dark Reaver Powder **Level 25**

This fine, black powder gives off no odor but can render a creature comatose if consumed.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the dark reaver powder to your weapon or five pieces of ammunition. Until the end of the encounter, whenever you hit a creature with a weapon attack using that weapon or ammunition, the target takes an extra 10 poison damage and is dazed until the end of your next turn.

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Pour the dark reaver powder into a drink or onto a plate of food. The first creature to consume the food or drink becomes unconscious until it takes an extended rest. At the end of that extended rest, the poisoned creature must make a saving throw at a -5 penalty. Success indicates that the person has overcome the poison and is no longer unconscious. Failure indicates that the unconscious condition persists until the next extended rest, when another saving throw can be made.

Dragon Bile

Dragon bile is one of the most sought-after substances harvested from dragons. It can be made into a deadly poison that can slay a person in a matter of minutes. The dragon bile used by assassins is among the most potent, and is harvested from the bodies of powerful and ancient dragons slain by adventurers. A brief touch of dragon bile can make it impossible for a creature to move or do anything else, while prolonged exposure is almost always fatal.

Dragon Bile **Level 25**

Harvested from the bodies of ancient dead dragons, this poison is among the most deadly.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the dragon bile extract to your weapon or one piece of ammunition. The first creature you hit with a weapon attack using that weapon or ammunition before you take an extended rest falls prone and is stunned until the end of your next turn.

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Minor Action. Apply the dragon bile to a single, handheld object. The first creature other than you to hold or wear the object for more than 1 minute dies.

Eye of Basilisk Powder

Among the rarest of poisons used by assassins, eye of basilisk powder is a fine powder that is exceptionally potent in minute quantities. The eyes of actual basilisks (harvested at great expense by adventurers) are dried out and ground into a powder that, when properly prepared, can turn its victims to stone. Assassins put small amounts of the powder into alchemical pellets which explode when broken to release a small cloud of the poison around the victim.

Eye of Basilisk Powder **Level 25**

This unremarkable white powder holds the petrifying ability of the basilisk.

Assassin Poison

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Standard Action. *Effect*: Make the following attack:
Ranged 5
Target: One creature
Special: You can add your enhancement bonus from your ki focus to the following attack and damage rolls.
Attack: Dexterity vs. Reflex
Hit: 4d10 + Dexterity modifier poison damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: The target is slowed (save ends). *First Failed Saving Throw*: The target is instead immobilized (save ends). *Second Failed Saving Throw*: The target is instead petrified.

Power (Consumable ✦ Poison): Standard Action. Place the eye of basilisk powder in a closed container, such as a chest or a jewelry box. The first creature to open the container is targeted by the above attack.

Level 26: Epic Destiny Power

Your foes' worst attacks cannot sway you from the great goal that lies before you. When all seems lost, you have the strength and determination to deny death and fight on.

Benefit: You gain a power associated with your epic destiny.

Level 27: Master Poisoner

The longer you work with your poisons, the more you learn about them. Whether you pick up the knowledge from a fellow assassin, pay a local apothecary for new instruction, or simply learn of new poisons by trial and error, your repertoire of poisons continues to grow.

Benefit: You learn one additional assassin's poison recipe of up to 25th level.

Level 28: Ability Score Increase

Your experience as an assassin makes you ever more deadly.

Benefit: You increase two ability scores of your choice by 1.

Level 29: Master Poisoner

The longer you work with your poisons, the more you learn about them. Whether you pick up the knowledge from a fellow assassin, pay a local apothecary for new instruction, or simply learn of new poisons by trial and error, your repertoire of poisons continues to grow.

Benefit: You learn one additional assassin's poison recipe of up to 25th level. When preparing poisons, you can create two poisons of up to 25th level and one of up to 15th level.

Level 30: Epic Destiny Feature

You have achieved the absolute pinnacle of your abilities. On the verge of facing your destiny, you gain one final edge that could spell the difference between ultimate victory and utter defeat.

Benefit: You gain a feature associated with your epic destiny.

Class Acts: Battlemind

the Ghosts of Nerath

By Scott Fitzgerald Gray
Illustration by Craig J. Spearing

"I was there when the Shining Citadel fell, whose true name is barely memory now. I was there when the surviving darkmages sacrificed themselves in advance of the cleansing of Khesen. I was there for the end of greatness, but I will be watching through the eyes of the ghosts who follow me when Nerath begins again."

– Uhon Nerika,
last commander of the Ghost Blades

Few except the most knowledgeable sages can recount the history and fall of the empire of Nerath as anything but guesswork, rumor, and legends that have quickly taken root in the shadow of lost truth. Among the most common of those legends are the tales of the elite Imperial Guard, including the Curthauri—the legendary legion of the Ghost Blades.

The Ghost Blades were an order of warriors charged with protecting the nobility of the empire and its far-flung kingdoms. Its members were exclusively and secretly battleminds. Their principles and training were said to trace back to the first members of that class who stood against the horrors of the Far Realm.

When the empire fell, the imperial legions fell with it. Most of the guard was destroyed in the chaos that consumed Nerath. The few survivors were hunted down in the aftermath by those forces quick to claim territory and power where the empire once stood, and also by those once loyal to the empire, who blamed its greatest warriors for its destruction. Within a generation, the Imperial Guard was destroyed and all but forgotten.

But across the frontier, from isolated hamlets to the roadhouses of the largest cities, folk have always spoken of lone wanderers outfitted in cloaks of gray and black. Seated around tavern tables and campfires, they spin elaborate tales of the empire's glory. Beneath their ragged tunics gleams ghost-gray armor, and the strike of their weapons is said to shroud them in shadow that protects them from all harm.

These are the ghosts of Nerath, whose psionic power connects them to the traditions of a dead empire—and sets them on an endless quest to see that

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empire restored once more. These battleminds share the faint and bitter memories of the ghosts who came before them—memories that trace back to the last of the Ghost Blades, whose knowledge, understanding, and purpose somehow survived their end.

These are the ghosts of Nerath. They wander the land that was once an empire, scouring its ruins and isolated points of civilization for something that only they would recognize. Perhaps they seek some legacy of the glory that once was.

Outside their tight-knit, mysterious circle—if such a thing even exists—no one knows how the knowledge and conviction of the Ghost Blades is passed down through successive generations of battleminds. Is it an innate, psionic instinct, or do they receive training in some remote, unsuspected location? All of them seem to search for the same signs that they believe promise the empire's return.

The truth is that the Ghost Blades are searching for the ancient lore and lost relics of the Empire which they believe still exist deep in the ruins that mark its fallen greatness. Ghosts of Nerath fight alongside the protectors of civilization and those who struggle to push back the dread chaos of the wilderness that consumes it. A ghost constantly seeks quests that show him or her the path that must be taken to hasten Nerath's return. All understand that such a return is not inevitable—it must be brought about through the effort and sacrifice of the Empire's most dedicated servants. Most importantly, it will happen only when the long-awaited signs appear to herald the return of an heir to the vacant imperial throne.

Whispered rumors in the empire's final days told of an infant girl born amid the lethal chaos of the Empire's final days. She survived her mother's death and was secreted away by Uhon Nerika, the last commander of the Ghost Blades. What became of the girl or her savior, no one knows. Every Ghost of Nerath believes with absolute certainty, however, that the Imperial bloodline has endured through her and that somewhere in the wide world, a descendant of the last Emperor is waiting to be found. Some ghosts have come to believe that this scion is fated to emerge from among their own number—one of Nerath's ghosts is heir to an empire without knowing it, but the truth will emerge when the world is once again ready.

The Ghosts of the Past

The ghost of Nerath is a battlemind character theme most suitable for the quick battlemind build. Although Nerath was a human-ruled empire, all humanoid cultures coexisted within its borders. Battleminds of any race can find their fates caught up in the shadows of the empire's past.

The ghosts are not a formal order or tradition, nor are they organized enough to compose a paragon path. However, existing paragon paths can be used to extend the ghost of Nerath theme if you and the DM see fit. In particular, the steel ego and zephyr blade paragon paths from *Player's Handbook 3* are good choices for a ghost of Nerath character.

Special Background

This background can connect a character to the traditions of the ghosts of Nerath. This is not mandatory; because of the ghosts' nebulous structure, a battlemind character of any background can make use of the thematic powers and weapons presented here. You must decide whether your character is knowingly a Ghost of Nerath who pursues a hidden agenda, or only a battlemind who picked up an unusual, little-known technique or tool in the course of a far-ranging career without understanding its full implications.

From a campaign perspective, bear in mind that these powers and weapons are ancient and unusual. Using them can draw attention from scholars of the Empire and especially from other battleminds or organizations which might not understand their origins and may be suspicious of anyone practicing unknown techniques. Beyond that, they *will* draw attention from any NPC Ghost of Nerath, whose identity will almost certainly come as a surprise to player characters.

Ghost of Nerath: From the day you were born, you were told the tales of blood and bravery that marked the empire's fall. As a child, you played out the ancient battles whose names were among the first words you learned, but Nerath was never more than stories to you. Or so it was until you first felt the spark of psionic power that marked you as a battlemind. With that power came a knowledge that filled you like a ghostly chorus—the memory of a dozen lifetimes never lived, tracing back to the last of the Ghost Blades.

Whether or not you sought the role, you are a ghost of Nerath fated to search for the signs that will herald the empire's rise from the ashes. Do you have the strength to take up a quest whose conclusion might lie long after your own death? Can you set aside the need for love and family, hearth and home to wander the world in search of the vague and elusive signs? Do you dare to consider that you might be the most important of those signs and scion to a bloodline long thought lost?

Associated Skills: Endurance, History

NEW POWERS AND ITEMS

The following new powers and magic items are the signature abilities of the ghosts of Nerath and define a character's full connection to that path. However, any battlemind character can use the powers, and characters of any class can use the weapons.

Shade Strike — Battlemind Attack 3

Wisps of shadow bind you to your foe, obscuring its attempts to strike back at you.

At-Will ✦ Augmentable, Psionic, Weapon
Standard Action **Melee** weapon
Target: One creature
Attack: Constitution vs. AC
Hit: 1[W] + Constitution modifier damage. Until you end your turn not adjacent to the target, you have partial concealment against the target.
Augment 2
Hit: 2[W] + Constitution modifier damage. Until you end your turn not adjacent to the target, you have partial concealment against the target, as do your allies while they are adjacent to you.

Ghost Jaunt — Battlemind Utility 6

You vanish from an enemy's sight, slipping past other foes as you move into attack position.

Encounter ✦ Illusion, Psionic
Move Action **Ranged** 5
Target: One creature marked by you
Effect: You become invisible to the target, then shift up to 5 squares to a square adjacent to the target. This invisibility lasts until the end of your turn or until you make an attack.

Shadow-Shroud Armor — Level 5+ Uncommon

This armor pulses with shadow when you are struck, lancing out to shroud you and your allies against further attack.

Lvl 5	+1	1,000 gp	Lvl 20	+4	125,000 gp
Lvl 10	+2	5,000 gp	Lvl 25	+5	625,000 gp
Lvl 15	+3	25,000 gp	Lvl 30	+6	3,125,000 gp

Armor: Chain, scale
Enhancement: AC
Power (Encounter ✦ Augmentable): Free Action. *Trigger:* You take damage from an attack. *Effect:* You and all allies within 3 squares of you gain partial concealment until the end of your next turn.
Augment 1: *Effect:* You and one ally within 3 squares of you gain total concealment until the end of your next turn.

Ghost Dance Weapon — Level 3+ Uncommon

You react to an enemy's attack with a lightning-fast strike, then slip away within a shroud of shadow.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Weapon: Any melee
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus, or +1d10 damage per plus with opportunity attacks
Property: Whenever you make an attack with this weapon while you have total concealment, you gain a +2 item bonus to all defenses until the start of your next turn.
Power (Daily ✦ Augmentable): Immediate Reaction. *Trigger:* You take damage from a melee attack by an enemy marked by you. *Effect:* Make a melee basic attack using this weapon against the triggering enemy. You then shift a number of squares equal to the weapon's enhancement bonus.
Augment 2: The attack deals 1[W] extra damage.

About the Author

Scott Fitzgerald Gray (9th-level layabout, vindictive neutral) started gaming in high school and has worked as a writer and editor much of the time since then. After belatedly realizing he could combine both vocations in 2004, he's been making up for lost time as a freelance RPG editor and designer, primarily for Wizards of the Coast. He lives in the Canadian hinterland with a schoolteacher, two daughters, and a large number of animal companions.

Pyromancy: The Magic of Fire

By Mike Mearls
Illustration by Craig J. Spearing

"I have unearthed vast tomes of ancient knowledge. I have delved deep into the depths of the earth and encountered creatures far beyond mortal ken. I have uncovered lost treasures of forgotten empires. And I have burned them all. I have burned them all for the greater glory of the unquenchable fire."

–Lord Kelwyn of the Ash-Choked Path, Archmage of Pyromancy

Many schools of magic exist, each with their own philosophies and aesthetics. Illusionists alternate between subtle trickery and outrageous distractions. Necromancers are grim creatures more at home under the light of a gibbous moon than the noonday sun. Evokers are aggressive, forceful wizards, more akin to a conquering general than a detached scholar.

Of all these wizards, none have quite the reputation of a pyromancer. Masters of fiery magic, pyromancers are regarded by many as half-mad, and drunk on power and destruction. They have a well-earned reputation for rage, aggression, and impatience. The truth is far more complex and, in some cases, marked by tragedy rather than rage or ambition.

The Tale of Lord Kelwyn

Lord Kelwyn was the scion of a long-forgotten realm, a land where the study of arcane magic stood above all other disciplines. Even the royal army adopted this approach. When war as at hand, Kelwyn's people sent forth companies of wizards to devastate, trick, and confuse their enemies. Few dared venture into the borders of that land, and for many decades peace and prosperity reigned.

It stood to reason that in a realm where arcane magic reigned supreme, those who wished to reign should take up its study. Kelwyn's father was a stern evoker who had won many battles against raiding

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ogres. His mother was a skilled transmuter whose spells transformed the ancient monuments that watched over the kingdom's borders into indomitable living statues.

Perhaps it was the lofty standards established by his parents, or maybe it was a streak of simple youthful rebellion within the boy. Whatever the cause, Kelwyn shunned the mages sent to tutor him. He preferred to wander the realm's forests, departing for weeks at a time with nothing more than a waterskin, his bow, and a quiver of arrows.

In time his parents grew so frustrated with him that they shackled him in irons and forced him to attend to his studies. By this time he had grown tall and strong. The first mage sent to tutor him escaped with a few bruises and a bloodied nose. The second suffered a broken arm. To Kelwyn's credit, he did lift the bookshelf he had knocked on to the poor wizard and used his knowledge of woodcraft to soothe his pain until the royal doctor arrived.

One day, a stranger appeared at the castle's gate. He wore crimson robes and a black turban. Although his hood was pulled far enough forward to conceal his face, he made no effort to hide his flickering tail. He was a tiefling from the far south, and he came bearing an offer to the royal family. He would succeed where a dozen tutors had failed. He would teach the intractable Kelwyn the secrets of fire magic, a relatively rare school that none within the realm had previously studied. Since Kelwyn was their only son and the law of the land clearly required the king to display proficiency in the wizardly arts, Kelwyn's parents eagerly accepted his offer.

The mysterious tutor entered Kelwyn's study. Servants gathered around the door, ready to spring to action at the first sounds of toppling bookshelves and cries of pain. But instead, they heard nothing. Hours passed, and soon the doors opened. The mysterious stranger emerged, his new apprentice in tow.

Kelwyn proved a natural student for the school of pyromancy. Although his spells lacked the subtle power of his mother's or the fine tactically precise control of his father's, he more than matched them in pure, unfettered power. His spells incinerated a troll warband. They cleansed the ghouls that infested a forgotten cemetery. It seemed clear that Kelwyn was on his way to joining the rest of his family's line in arcane greatness.

His parents were therefore shocked and surprised when the mysterious tutor came to them one day and begged to be released from his duties.

"The fire burns too brightly within him," he said to them. "There will come a time when he cannot control it. I cannot set him upon a path that will lead to his ruin."

Kelwyn's parents laughed. "Our line has mastered magic since the dawn of the world. How could something as simple as fire prove too much for our son?"

"The fire has power more subtle than you can imagine. The pyromancer commands a magic first crafted by the primordials. Even today, the voice of those long-forgotten beings echoes in the magic we wield. It offers us great power, but it demands obedience first, submission soon after, and then slavery. We do not control this power. We channel and resist it."

Kelwyn's parents paid no heed to the tutor's warnings. They locked him away, seized his books of knowledge, and gave them to Kelwyn. Clearly, their son could complete his training without him.

True to his bloodline, Kelwyn delved faster and deeper into his studies than even his parents expected. He became obsessed with mastering every aspect of fire, housing himself in chambers where lanterns and cauldrons filled with oil burned ceaselessly. He disappeared for days at time, consumed by his studies to the point that he paid no heed to food or drink. He was on the verge of a great breakthrough, he told his parents. Excitedly, they called the greatest sages and wizards of the land to unveil their son's great achievement.

Thus it came to pass that the most powerful folk of the realm were on hand to witness Kelwyn's transformation. He stood before a great crowd of onlookers in the royal feasting hall, eyes bulging and frantic. What the crowd took for excitement was instead madness. What they saw as a harmless flame soon grew to a searing holocaust. The cry of triumph, a joyful shout of discovery, gave way to a bloodthirsty shriek. Kelwyn became a creature of fire, a being of pure flame who reduced his realm's finest, most powerful folk to ash in the time it takes to draw a single breath. The castle burned, its folk died. Kelwyn's body was so thoroughly consumed by the conflagration that no trace of it remained. Only the tutor, forgotten in his dungeon cell, survived to spread the tale since known as Kelwyn's Immolation.

Kelwyn is the most renowned example of the dangers of fire magic. The tutor spoke true when he pleaded with the doomed lord's parents. The first stirrings of fire magic arose in the ancient days, at the behest of a great elemental lord of fire. Although its name is long since forgotten, that creature still lives within the arcane phrases and mystic patterns of pyromancy.

Kelwyn's example reminds all pyromancers of the power and danger offered by their magic. The anger and fury many harbor must be projected both within

and without, a useful channel for a power that could grow overwhelming and a stern reminder of the risks they undertake. It is said that a pyromancer saves the hottest wrath for his or her mistakes, and few practitioners of this school of magic would disagree.

Mechanics

As a mage, you can choose pyromancy as your school of magic. The benefits you gain from this school are outlined below. If you choose to specialize in pyromancy, a high Constitution score serves you well.

Level 1: Pyromancy Apprentice

Apprentice Mage feature

Fire roars through your soul just as it courses through your magic. The fire you tap in to burns hotter than any source found in the world or even on the planes.

Benefit: You gain a +1 bonus to damage rolls with arcane fire attacks. This bonus increases to +2 at 11th level and +3 at 21st level. Additionally, your attacks ignore fire resistance.

Level 5: Pyromancy Expert

Expert Mage feature

When confronting others, you make it plain that your control over your power decreases as your anger increases. Whether your threat is genuine or a mere bluff, only you can say for sure.

Benefit: You gain a +2 bonus to Bluff checks and Intimidate checks.

Level 10: Pyromancy Master

Master Mage feature

Your spells ignite the ground, spreading flames and consuming your enemies even if they are fortunate enough to dodge your attacks.

Benefit: When you use an area or close arcane fire attack power that is not already a zone, the area of the attack becomes a zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. Creatures that end their turns within the zone take fire damage equal to your Constitution modifier.

Level 11: Pyromancy Action

Enigmatic mage paragon path feature

Your first steps along the path of pyromancy mastery required you to relinquish some control. In doing so, you learned the secrets of fire magic. Now, when you draw upon your reserves of energy and effort, you exercise precise, deadly control of your magic.

Benefit: When you spend an action point to take an extra action, pick an enemy within 10 squares of you. The next time you damage that enemy with an at-will or encounter fire attack this turn, that enemy takes damage as if you rolled the maximum result on all dice for that damage roll. If you score a critical hit, the extra damage is instead maximized. You gain no benefit if the damage you inflict does not require a damage roll.

Level 11: Pyromancy Encounter Power

Enigmatic mage paragon path feature

Kelwyn's devouring fire has a sinister reputation. It calls forth a sheet of fire similar to *burning hands*, but those who have survived this spell's fury claim that it is a living thing—a whispering spirit that burned both body and soul. The few pyromancers willing to discuss the spell tell of a compelling voice that sometimes speaks to them, urging them to unleash the spell and wreak havoc regardless of the consequences.

Kelwyn's Devouring Fire — **Enigmatic Mage Attack 11**

A sheet of flames roars forth from your hands, burning all in its path.

Encounter ✦ Arcane, Evocation, Fire, Implement
Standard Action **Close** blast 5
Target: Each creature in the blast
Attack: Intelligence vs. Reflex
Hit: 3d8 + Intelligence modifier fire damage.
Miss: Half damage, or slide the target up to 4 squares and it must end the slide outside the blast. If it cannot end the slide outside the blast, it instead takes half damage.
Effect: If you kill one or more creatures with this attack, all creatures in the blast take fire damage equal to 5 + your Constitution modifier. Apply this extra damage after attacking all the targets.

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Level 12: Pyromancy Utility Power

Enigmatic mage paragon path feature

If *devouring fire* was the first sign of Kelwyn's descent into madness, the *fiery form* spell he developed marked his slow transformation from a living creature to a being of pure fire. *Kelwyn's fiery form* shifts its caster from a mortal creature to an elemental being of fire and ash. In this form, waves of heat cascade from you to burn creatures that draw close to you. The more victims you present to it, the deadlier the fire burns.

Kelwyn's Fiery Form Enigmatic Mage Utility 12

You become a creature of fire as you give both body and soul over to the power you command. For a few moments, it now commands you.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Fire, Polymorph
Minor Action **Personal**

Effect: You transform into a humanoid creature of ash and fire. Until the end of the encounter, you gain immunity to fire and a power bonus to damage rolls with fire attacks equal to the number of targets of the attack. If at least one of those targets is an ally, the bonus increases by 4. Creatures that end their turns adjacent to you take 5 + your Constitution modifier fire damage.

Level 20: Pyromancy Daily Power

Enigmatic mage paragon path feature

This deadly spell is thought by some to be the (barely) controlled version of the spell which vaporized Kelwyn and ended his dynasty. *Kelwyn's final devastation* channels such destructive power that even the most powerful pyromancers cannot fully control it. By surrendering to the flame, you unleash vast destructive power.

Kelwyn's Final Devastation Enigmatic Mage Attack 20

You gather and then channel fiery energy that chars your flesh as you unleash a blast of fire.

Daily ✦ Arcane, Evocation, Fire, Implement
Standard Action **Area** burst 2 within 20
Target: Each creature in the burst
Attack: Intelligence vs. Reflex
Hit: 10d10 + Intelligence modifier fire damage.
Miss: Half damage.
Effect: You take damage equal to your bloodied value. This damage cannot be reduced in any way.

About the Author

Mike Mearls is the Group Manager for the Dungeons & Dragons® roleplaying game. His recent credits include *Player's Handbook 3*, *Hammerfast*, and *Monster Manual 3*.

Weapon of the Common Man
Staff Fighters

By Rodney Thompson

Illustration by Craig J. Spearing

There is perhaps no weapon simpler than the staff. More than that, the staff is the weapon of the common man. Swords are expensive and often outlawed by controlling lords, leaving commoners nothing to protect themselves with other than simple weapons, and what could be simpler to make than a staff?

The quarterstaff is a weapon with a long history. It dates back to the earliest days of civilization and is commonly found in cultures from all corners of the world.

History of the Quarterstaff

Given the simplicity of the weapon, it is impossible to determine where and when the quarterstaff originated as a weapon. In Western culture, the weapon rose to both prominence and fame during the Middle Ages, when commoners working under the feudal system often needed weapons to protect themselves not only from brigands but from the servants of rival lords as well. The staff was an inexpensive weapon to make, so that commoners with little in the way of wealth could use it to defend themselves without access to costly steel. The quarterstaff is also popularized in fiction during this time, as it is shown to be the chosen weapon of Robin Hood's companion Little John.

In Eastern cultures, a variety of staff weapons are staples of many martial arts styles. As in Western cultures, the staff actually sees its origins more as a tool than as a weapon—one used for carrying baskets, pushing boats along shallows, herding animals, etc. In ancient China, the staff was a weapon kept by commoners who were forbidden traditional weapons, and they were used to continue the tradition of passing down family martial arts styles in secret. The staff is often depicted in Eastern literature as a weapon of the humble or common warrior. In fact, it is said that the great Japanese swordsman Miyamoto Musashi was only defeated once—by a man wielding a quarterstaff.

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Using the Quarterstaff

The quarterstaff makes a great weapon choice for any hero who comes from a humble background. While heroes who come from loftier backgrounds certainly can use staffs, the staff is a symbol of the common man, so choosing to fight with a staff rather than more expensive and exclusive weapons like swords and polearms proclaims that the character identifies more closely with commoners than with nobility or full-time warriors.

If you want to use a staff as your chief weapon, several existing options can get you started.

The Staff Expertise feat (*Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, page 317) should be one of the first things that you look at when creating a hero whose primary weapon is the quarterstaff. This feat not only provides a bonus to accuracy for the quarterstaff (both for weapon users and implement users) but also gives the benefit of 1 extra square of reach for its wielder.

Additionally, the Staff Fighting feat (*Dragon Magazine Annual*, page 94) allows you to treat the quarterstaff as a double weapon. This allows you to use the staff with feats like Two-Weapon Defense and Two-Weapon Fighting (*Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, page 319). Furthermore, it allows you to use the quarterstaff instead of two separate weapons, making it a good option for rangers and tempest fighters. At epic tier, the Bludgeon Mastery feat can increase your critical hit range with the staff.

Below you will also find several new options that can help you build a staff fighter, plus some advice about how to craft a character for which a staff is thematically appropriate.

Knights

The knight is a defender of his or her people. Knights stand stalwart against all manner of threats, and what better way to show your dedication to defending your people than by wielding the weapon most commonly used by them? Though most knights typically defend while using a shield and a one-handed weapon, the speed with which a quarterstaff can be whirled around the body means that a trained knight can deflect attacks just as easily with the staff as with the shield.

What does it say about you as a knight fighter if you use a staff? It says that you are a hero of the common folk. It says that you might have received your training in secret; it says that you might live in a place where there simply was no chance for you to train with a sword and shield.

You can choose the Spinning Deflection feature instead of the Shield Finesse feature when you create a knight. Additionally, at 7th level you can choose the Bludgeoning Staff feature for your Weapon Specialization.

Level 1: Spinning Deflection

You can spin a quarterstaff around your body so quickly that you can turn aside attacks with it just as well as you could with a shield.

Benefit: While you are wielding a quarterstaff, you are considered to be wielding a shield for powers and effects that require you to wield one. You also gain a +1 shield bonus to AC and Reflex.

Bludgeoning Staff

The thickness of a staff, combined with the speed with which you can whip it around to strike at an enemy, can hit your enemies with such force that they reel away from you.

Benefit: When you use *power strike* with a staff, you can push the target up to 2 squares and can shift 2 squares.

Slayers

The staff may be a weapon of defense for commoners, but for those who face bandits, brigands, and monsters on a daily basis, the staff can be a lethal weapon of offense that staggers enemies. While some might favor the axe or the sword, you know that the simple staff of ash or oak can crack skulls and break bones just as easily and is far less likely to draw the attention of others when you roll into a new town.

What does it say about you as a slayer fighter if you use a staff? It says that you favor a more subtle approach to arming yourself. A staff can be a walking stick or a shepherd's tool, and you are content to let others underestimate you because they don't fear anyone who's not carrying a greataxe. It also says that you may be self-taught and learned how to crack skulls with a quarterstaff in order to keep yourself alive.

You can choose the Rapid Quarterstaff option for your Weapon Specialization class feature at 7th level. Additionally, you can choose the Staggering Staff power as your 12th level utility power for the Mythic Slayer paragon path.

Rapid Quarterstaff

When you strike a solid blow upon your enemy, you can convert the force of the impact to let you whip the staff around you at incredible speeds. You hammer at the foes around you with a broad, sweeping blow.

Benefit: When you use *power strike* with a staff, all enemies adjacent to you other than the target of *power strike* suffer damage equal to your Dexterity modifier.

Staggering Staff

One of the most dangerous things about the staff in your hands is that you can attack with it in a series of quick but varied strikes. Even when you miss your enemies, your quick jabs cause them to flinch away and stumble into whatever position you choose.

Staggering Staff — Mythic Slayer Utility 12

Your staff whirls in your hands, and your enemy stumbles into just the right place.

Encounter ✦ **Martial**
Free Action **Melee** weapon
Trigger: You miss an enemy with a melee attack using a staff
Target: The enemy you missed
Effect: You slide the target 2 squares.

New Feats

The following new feats are available to any character that meets the prerequisites.

Ordained Weapon Feats

Many churches represent their devotion to their deity by carrying a favored weapon. Often this weapon is similarly represented in depictions of that deity and its avatars. The clerics, paladins, and other adherents of these churches often draw focus and confidence when wielding their deity's favored weapon.

The feats in this category all modify divine weapon attack powers. They are ideal for clerics, paladins, and other divine weapon-using classes.

Ordained Weapon
Staff of Knowledge
Staff of Travel

Staff of Knowledge

The staff has often been associated with the sage, and what better representation of the sage is there than the god Ioun. Followers of Ioun often carry a staff as a favored weapon to display their dedication to a life in pursuit of knowledge.

Prerequisite: Intelligence 13

Benefit: You gain combat advantage with the first divine melee weapon attack you make with a staff during an encounter.

Staff of Travel

Most travelers who spend a great deal of time on the road know that a good walking staff can be invaluable, so the church of Avandra recognizes the staff as a symbol of their goddess's control over the domain of travel.

Prerequisite: Constitution 13

Benefit: When you use a staff to make a divine melee weapon attack, if you hit you can shift 1 square as a free action.

Thief Weapon Feats

Most thieves prefer small, subtle weapons when plying their craft. Some, however, specifically train with other weapons to give them an advantage over their fellow rogues. The feats in this category modify the Sneak Attack feature and backstab power in some way, expanding the use of these elements with weapons not traditionally associated with the rogue.

Thief Weapon
Backbreaking Staff
Sneaky Staff

Backbreaking Staff

While a staff is difficult to hide, it is a deceptive weapon, one which appears to be nothing more than a utilitarian object for the elderly and the injured. Thieves who use the staff rely on its innocent appearance to avoid detection, while its size and weight make it ideal for rendering a foe senseless.

Prerequisite: *Backstab*

Benefit: When you use *backstab* on an attack using a staff, on a hit the target is also dazed until the end of your next turn.

Sneaky Staff

In trained hands, a staff can be used for jabs and quick strikes which allow the wielder to hit vulnerable areas when the opportunity presents itself.

Prerequisite: Sneak Attack

Benefit: You can gain the benefits of Sneak Attack and your Weapon Finesse class feature when you make a weapon attack with a quarterstaff, and you gain proficiency in the quarterstaff. In addition, you can use a quarterstaff with rogue powers that require a light blade and are not ranged or area powers.

Weapon Training

The intense study of a single weapon allows a warrior to achieve unmatched levels of skill, though at the cost of flexibility. The following feats add to the Weapon Training category.

Weapon Training
Stout-Handed Staff
War Wizard's Staff

Stout-Handed Staff

Drawing on a martial discipline first created by a wandering halfling bard, you have learned to use a staff despite its great size compared to your small frame.

Prerequisite: Size Small

Benefit: You wield the quarterstaff as if it was a small weapon. If you knock prone an enemy that is larger than you with a weapon attack using a staff, you can shift 1 square as a free action.

War Wizard's Staff

Few wizards venture close to their enemies in battle, but you have learned to wield your staff as both a weapon and an implement. As you prepare to unleash a blast of arcane power, you augment your staff with such power that you herd an ally out of your blast with it or send a foe tumbling into your spell's path.

Benefit: When you use a close arcane attack with a staff implement, you can slide one adjacent creature to a different square adjacent to you before making the attack.

About the Author

Rodney Thompson is an RPG designer at Wizards of the Coast. Originally from Chattanooga, TN, his credits for Dungeons & Dragons® include *Monster Manual 3*, the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*, and *Monster Vault*.

Winning Races: Dwarves

Favored of the All-Father

By Matt Sernett

Illustration by Matthias Kollros

Dwarves know Moradin as the All-Father because he crafted all dwarves. Yet Moradin has made many things in his immortal lifetime. Some were stronger and some more beautiful, but none found so much favor in Moradin's bejeweled heart as his dwarves. The dwarves were the first of Moradin's makings that made him proud not only of his own skill, but proud to know them and prouder still that they prayed to him.

Dwarves honor their creator through prayer, but also through proud traditions. Knowledge and customs passed down through the generations—almost unchanged from the Dawn Age—guide dwarves through the uncertain present and into the unknowable future with the confidence that what has been will be. The past lives on in the present through the deeds of honorable dwarves. So shall it always be as long as any of the favored of the All-Father draw breath.

This article presents feats that are compatible with the new Dungeons & Dragons *Essentials*™ products. Feats are grouped into categories so that you can make decisions about what feats to take based on your character's personality, background, and goals. Although you can take feats from any category, sticking with one or two presents you with a clear path and reinforces the themes of your character as you gain levels. Then, after looking at the

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themed categories and choosing feats that appeal to your character concept, you can find the feat descriptions presented in alphabetical order at the end of the article.

Giant Slaying

The titans, sons and daughters of the mighty primordials of old, bound to their service the race of dwarves. Enslaved by these powerful masters and their lesser kin—the still massive and mighty giants—dwarves lived in chains for untold centuries. Giant feet trod stones mortared with dwarf blood, and giant hearths blazed with fires stoked by dwarf bones.

Moradin took pride in his creations. Despite their many hardships, they endured. The storm of the titans' wrath was met with the stoicism of stone. Yet pride comes not just from looking at one's good works, but at seeing oneself as good, and one dwarf, Clangeddin Silverbeard, could bear the giants' yoke no longer.

Moradin had created the dwarves and given them to the primordials, who had in turn granted them to their creations, the titans and giants. Now the dwarves gave their creations to their masters. It was the order of things since time immemorial. Clangeddin decided instead to give something to himself and to his people. In secret, he made two fine axes, melding into them the strands of his own silver beard. Then Clangeddin set about giving the dwarves pride in themselves. He showed them how to cut the giants down to size, and he offered the titans the gift of fear.

Clangeddin's rebellion came amid the Dawn War, when gods and primordials battled for control of the world. For the first time, Moradin took pride in his creations—not just for the greatness of what he had made, but for the greatness they inspired in him. Clangeddin Silverbeard became an exarch of Moradin, and ever since then the dwarves have had a tradition of training to take on challenges much larger than themselves.

GIANT SLAYING FEATS

Feat	Effect
Beneath Notice	When you and an ally are adjacent to the same enemy of Large or greater size, you gain combat advantage against that enemy.
Giant Killer	When you score a critical hit against a creature of Large of greater size, you gain an extra critical damage die.

DWARVEN STAMINA FEATS

Feat	Effect
Poison Adaptation	You gain poison resistance.

STEADY AS STONE FEATS

Feat	Effect
Knock Back	You can knock prone a foe within your reach when you make saving throw to prevent yourself from being knocked prone.
Quick Steps (Dwarf)	You gain a +1 bonus to speed.
Solid Footing (Dwarf)	You ignore difficult terrain that is the result of stairs, rubble, or stone.

Dwarven Stamina

Moradin's clerics exhort all to face difficulty with stoicism and to endure danger with courage. Dwarves honor the tenacity and determination of even the foulest foes, and their legends are filled with battles between combatants that last for days, months, and even years. Dwarven stamina itself is legend, and dwarves are renowned for their ability to outfight, outdrink, and outlast opponents.

Berronar Truesilver acts as the patron of dwarven stamina. Moradin relies upon her clear thinking and steady hand in all his plans. And even Clangeddin's bravado and bluster are said to wither before her unwavering and serious gaze. An exarch and consort of Moradin, Berronar is the stern and steadfast mother-figure to all dwarves. Dwarves who desire strength to withstand trying times, patience to see their quest through to the end, or resilience to spring back to health after taking harm say a prayer to Berronar.

Steady as Stone

Although dwarven stamina might be mocked as stubbornness, few find humor in a dwarf's ties to the earth. Like the sea crashing against cliffs, a dwarf can stand against waves of foes and not be driven back. Powerful limbs and a hunkered form makes it difficult to throw them off balance.

With a little work, any dwarf can turn these inherent traits into a superior advantage. Such a dwarf in the halls and caverns of his or her home can be as fleet as any elf in the forest.

FEATS

Although designed for dwarves, most of the following feats are available to any character.

Beneath Notice

You know how to use your enemy's size against it. With an ally for distraction, you occupy your foe's blind spot.

Benefit: While you and an ally are adjacent to the same enemy of Large or greater size, you gain combat advantage against that enemy.

Giant Killer

You know how to cut your enemies down to size. Larger foes mean bigger weak spots.

Benefit: When you score a critical hit against a creature of Large or greater size, the creature takes 1d6 extra damage.

Knock Back

No one pushes you around—at least not without you pushing back. You use your solid footing and combat skill to turn momentum against a foe when someone tries to bowl you over.

Prerequisite: Dwarf

Benefit: When you succeed on a saving throw to avoid being knocked prone, you can knock prone one enemy of size Large or smaller that is adjacent to you.

Poison Adaptation

Due to frequent exposure or unusual stamina, you've become inured to poison.

Benefit: You gain resist 5 poison. The resistance increases to 10 at 11th level and 15 at 21st level.

Quick Steps

A dwarf need not give up speed for steadiness, and you're living proof. You have trained long and hard to gain fleetness of foot, and now you can keep pace with any elf or human.

Prerequisite: Dwarf

Benefit: You gain a +1 feat bonus to speed.

Solid Footing

From living in the echoing ruins of the mighty halls built by your dwarf ancestors, you have become accustomed to all their varied terrain. You move across any stone and earth as easily as any eladrin flits across a dance floor.

Prerequisite: Dwarf

Benefit: You gain the earth walk ability (you ignore difficult terrain that is the result of rubble, uneven stone, or earthen construction such as stairs).

About the Author

Matt Sernett is a writer and game designer for Wizards of the Coast who splits his time between Dungeons & Dragons and Magic: The Gathering. Recent credits include *Player's Handbook Races: Tieflings*, *The Plane Above: Secrets of the Astral Sea*, and *Magic the Gathering: Zendikar*. When he's not making monsters or building worlds, he's watching bad fantasy movies you don't realize exist and shouldn't bother to learn about.

Winning Races: The Amethyst Sea

By Peter Schaefer ✦ *Illustration by Slawomir Maniak*

The innate elemental natures of genasi make them suited to the challenges of life in the Elemental Chaos—and to lives as slaves to the many cruel and mighty creatures of that plane. Firesoul genasi haul carts on efreets' private estates. Earthsoul genasi toil as miners under an earth titan's uncaring eyes. Trapped as unwilling acolytes, stormsoul genasi cannot escape a cult of Mual-Tar. The Smoldering Duke employs many cindersoul genasi in his Choking Palace. Voidsoul genasi slaves aid demons in their torture on the fringe of the Abyss. So many of the genasi living in the Elemental Chaos are trapped in forced servitude that a secret group exists to free them and ferry them to the natural world: the Amethyst Sea.

The Amethyst Sea is composed primarily of genasi: the founder Ameth, the allies she has recruited to this purpose, the freed slaves who choose to join the fight, and those who have flocked to her banner. An assortment of other allies works with the Amethyst Sea. The **Starfall Picks** are a group of dwarves who fight out of honor for the freedom their ancestors once earned. A smattering of elves and eladrin (with one drow) who call themselves the **Summer Hounds** refuse to divulge why they help, but Ameth appreciates them. The **Lost Sock** is a contingent of a guild of thieves, con artists, and extortionists from the world who are openly trying to expand into the Elemental Chaos by infiltrating as they free slaves; as long as enslaved genasi end up free, Ameth is happy to let the thieves help.

Locations

Ameth leads her operations from two headquarters: one in the world and one in the Elemental Chaos. In a reverse of what most consider safe, the portal connecting the two opens easily from the Elemental Chaos into the world but is sealed and locked in the other direction. Ameth's principles allow her to worry less about elemental incursion and more about the kidnapping or retrieval of genasi into the Elemental Chaos. The portal is a boundary and a milestone: Once she smuggles someone through the gate into the natural world, no pursuing hunter can simply turn around and bring that person back.

The Amethyst Sea's base in the world is known as Harrow Keep, a pair of watchtowers on opposite sides of Harrow Gorge with a bridge between them. The bridge supports a keep large enough for Ameth's followers and allies. Because of its perch on the gorge, Harrow Keep is vulnerable to undermining from beneath, which is one reason Ameth maintains neutrality regarding the politics of the world around

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her and insists that her allies do the same, to varying degrees of success.

In the Elemental Chaos, the Amethyst Sea operates out of a warehouse in the Avencina district of the City of Brass. The owner of the warehouse is a low-rank efreet who believes Ameth makes her money by allowing inhabitants of the world into the Commoner's Market. The Amethyst Sea uses the slave market in the Arches district only for reconnaissance and research

Operations

Every rescue is unique. Ameth once planned and participated in each, but as the movement grew and she gained support and momentum, she learned to delegate. Her view of leadership causes her to offer opinions on every mission the Amethyst Sea undertakes, and she still participates in every rescue attempt. Her aides advise against this exposure, fearing her capture would shipwreck the Amethyst Sea, but she insists it is her duty.

Deception is the Amethyst Sea's greatest weapon. Few rescues are direct assaults on the slave traffickers or owners, because the Amethyst Sea cannot muster the resources to effectively meet their wealthy opponents blow for blow. Ameth and her allies instead infiltrate their enemies' organizations, working with slave traffickers to gain their trust or entering the employment of a major slave owner. Once in a secure position, the Amethyst agent feeds information to the rest of the group, and someone at Harrow Keep plans the extraction. The best operations preserve the agent's security. Some agents have been undercover in slave markets or efreets' households for over a decade.

Using the Amethyst Sea

It's easy to introduce the Amethyst Sea into your game. The heroes meet the Amethyst Sea because . . .

- they need access to the Elemental Chaos, or to the City of Brass specifically, and the nearest portal is at Harrow Keep;
- their conflict with an efreet noble or a City of Brass merchant prince is about to disrupt a long-term Amethyst operation;
- people they need to rescue are caught up in a massive enslavement operation, and they need assistance;
- a bargain they have struck requires them to disable or hinder the Amethyst Sea in some way.

Getting what they need from the Amethyst Sea requires the adventurers to assist on a rescue operation, acquire some necessary magic items for them, or go where the Amethyst Sea can't to get something done.

Heroic Tier Feats

Ameth and her followers have learned new ways to use their elemental affiliations to aid them in freeing others, or in freeing themselves. The following feats are suitable for any character who meets the prerequisite.

Acid Wash

Prerequisite: Genasi, *acid surge* racial power

Benefit: When you use *acid surge*, you ignore the immobilized, restrained, and slowed conditions during the move.

Collapse into Nothing

Prerequisite: Genasi, *earthshock* racial power

Benefit: When you knock a creature prone with *earthshock*, that creature is removed from play until the start of its next turn.

Dwindling Strength

Prerequisite: Genasi, *firedeath* racial power

Benefit: When you use *firedeath*, you are no longer grabbed and cannot be grabbed until the end of your next turn. In addition, enemies adjacent to you take a −5 penalty to damage rolls against you until the end of your next turn.

Firepulse Transformation

Prerequisite: Genasi, *firepulse* racial power

Benefit: *Firepulse* targets each enemy adjacent to you instead of only the triggering enemy.

Forceful Shock

Prerequisite: Genasi, *earthshock* racial power

Benefit: When you hit an enemy with *earthshock*, you can also push that enemy up to 2 squares.

Freeing Current

Prerequisite: Genasi, *swiftcurrent* racial power

Benefit: When you use *swiftcurrent*, you ignore the immobilized, restrained, and slowed conditions during the move.

Sickening Plague

Prerequisite: Genasi, *plaguebearer* racial power

Benefit: When you use *plaguebearer*, enemies take a −2 penalty to all defenses while adjacent to

you. This effect on you lasts until the end of your next turn.

Storm Step

Prerequisite: Genasi, *promise of storm* racial power

Benefit: When you use *promise of storm*, whenever you hit a creature with a lightning or thunder attack before the end of your next turn, you can teleport to a square adjacent to that creature.

Swift Winds

Prerequisite: Genasi, *windwalker* racial power

Benefit: When you use *windwalker*, your flying does not provoke opportunity attacks.

Paragon Path: Element Unchained

"Now I'm free—to kick your ass."

Prerequisite: Genasi

Ameth's closest friend and advisor, Sot-Olmat, pioneered a discipline of rigorous mastery over the elements within a genasi. It is a discipline that one can master through a combination of meditation on a simple mantra and a series of exercises that look harmless but serve to unlock elemental potential within the genasi. The mantra is a repetition in Primordial regarding one's elemental affinity: "Fire cannot be chained," or "Water cannot be chained." Some manifestations require the mantra be changed: "Earth is not chained; earth is the chain." "Acid consumes all chains." Sot-Olmat developed this path while a slave, and he continues to expose himself to danger to teach the rudiments of it to other enslaved genasi.

A genasi who studies this discipline becomes impossible to bind or cage. He or she can escape bonds of all sorts swiftly, becoming a master of escape artistry through the mastery of the elemental nature innate to every genasi.

Element Unchained Path Features

Liberating Action (11th level): When you spend an action point to take an extra action, you and each ally within 5 squares of you ignores the slowed, immobilized, and restrained conditions until the end of your next turn.

Elements Unleashed (11th level): When you use an encounter or daily attack power, you can deal damage of any type that any of your manifestations grants you resistance against instead of the type or types of damage which the attack normally deals.

Unchained Assault (16th level): When you hit with an attack while you are slowed, immobilized, or restrained, you end slowing, immobilizing, or restraining effects currently affecting you.

Element Unchained Powers

Elemental Eruption — Element Unchained Attack 11

You disappear into a burst of energy and reform elsewhere.

Encounter ✦ Acid, Cold, Fire, Lightning, Poison, Psychic, Teleportation
Standard Action — **Close** burst 2
Target: Each creature in burst
Attack: Primary ability + 6 vs. Reflex
Level 21: Primary ability + 9 vs. Reflex
Hit: 2d8 + primary ability modifier acid, cold, fire, lightning, poison, and psychic damage.
Effect: You teleport to any square in the burst or any square adjacent to the burst.

Elemental Transposition — Element Unchained Utility 12

You dissipate into your constituent elements, reforming once danger is past.

Encounter ✦ Zone
Standard Action — **Close** burst 2
Effect: The burst creates a lightly obscured zone that lasts until the end of your next turn. You are removed from play until the start of your next turn, when you return to a square within the zone.

Duplicate Escape — Element Unchained Attack 20

The elements that compose you are everywhere, and you manipulate them into simulacra of you to confound your enemies.

Daily ✦ Conjuration, Teleportation
Standard Action — **Close** burst 5
Effect: You conjure a duplicate of you in up to 4 squares in the burst. Each duplicate makes a single-target at-will ranged or melee attack against a different creature using your basic attack. A duplicate lasts until the end of your next turn, is indistinguishable from you, and can be attacked. A duplicate that takes damage is destroyed.
Sustain Minor: You and any one duplicate can teleport, swapping places, then each duplicate moves your speed. In addition, the duplicates persist until the end of your next turn.

About the Author

Peter Schaefer is a sentient cactus. He (though gender assignation is arbitrary) can move under his own power through telekinesis, which also allows him to manipulate his computer through its standard peripherals. His vegetable perspective makes him an essential RPG developer on such products as *Primal Power*, *Dark Sun*, and *Player's Handbook 3*, in addition to numerous *D&D Insider* articles. But do not cross him; the needles he can fire carry deadly venom.

Winning Races: Muls beyond the Desert

By Robert J. Schwalb ✦ *Illustration by Slawomir Maniak*

Bred to be slaves, born to fight and toil, muls are the bedrock of Athasian society. In another world, a blending of dwarf and man would be unthinkable, but to the crafty minds of the templars and those sorcerer-kings who rule them, the mul is a near perfect creation. A young mul faces a bitter life full of hardship with only a shallow grave and dry eyes to mark his or her passing.

Yet not all muls are content to accept the poor hand fate has dealt them. Some see freedom as their ultimate goal and devote their wretched lives to breaking free from the chains that bind them.

Of all the unusual races populating the world of *Dark Sun,* muls are the most iconic. They embody the challenge inherent in the setting while possessing the strength and grit to overcome them. They are peerless warriors, bred for battle, tireless in their pursuits, and unflinching in danger's face. It is no wonder muls have enjoyed enduring popularity since their debut in 2nd Edition AD&D.

The *Dark Sun Campaign Setting* presents a world markedly different from the core *D&D* setting. Between the strange, fearsome monsters and the despotic sorcerer-kings, the often cruel environment shaped by reckless magic and a prevalence of psionic magic, combined with all the other distinctive elements, a *Dark Sun* game is unlike any other Dungeons & Dragons® experience. Even if you don't play in a *Dark Sun* campaign, its concepts and options provide interesting additions to any world. Plundering is a big and important part of D&D, and this article shows you one way to do it for one of the more distinctive races on Athas.

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In the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, muls are born from human and dwarf parents. This union is prompted by slavers and nobles to produce a hardy warrior or worker capable of withstanding incredible punishment. The conditions into which muls are born are not common, if present at all, in most *D&D* worlds, because slavery rarely exists outside the most evil communities. Rather than seeding muls into civilized lands willy-nilly, muls are more likely to come out of those places where evil holds sway, perhaps as slaves to the drow, mind flayers, derro, or even the giants. The following summary is one example story which can explain how muls fit into your non-Athas world.

Forged in Darkness, Tempered in Blood

Drow slavers created the first muls in an age long forgotten. The dark elves and their slave soldiers welled up from the Underdark's blackest depths to silence the ringing hammers of Kög Kragnarn, a mighty dwarven citadel high up in the sprawling mountains called the Shattered Teeth. The drow were merciless butchers, driving their enraged quaggoths before them to slaughter the doughty defenders in a great clash. When the frothing beasts set upon the bold defenders, the drow flowed by them to enslave the children. They had need of miners in the deep abyss in which they lived, and dwarves had long proved equal to the rigors posed by such work. These dwarf captives were dragged in chains to the bowels of the earth, then forced to toil and dig, tearing what adamantine they could from the grasping stone. Even with their vaunted endurance, these dwarves died from the hard work and poor conditions in which they were forced to live.

The solution to their problems came in a vision from the Demon Queen of Spiders. The high priestess, a vile harridan named Qualkaral, divined the goddess's intent and decreed that the dwarves would mingle with human captives to produce offspring greater than either parent. Those who resisted faced magical compulsion. Those who complied wept bitter tears for the evils done to both their people.

The vision proved accurate. The strength and endurance of this mighty brood was greater than that possessed by the loathsome quaggoths, who had been thralls of the drow for generations. These muls, as the drow called them with derision, proved superior in nearly every way because they could work without rest for days on end. They could endure the most appalling injuries and still struggle against the daunting stone.

So the breeding continued, until eventually the dwarf and human sires faded out and the muls were alone in the pressing gloom.

Lolth is a fickle mistress who withdraws her favor with little warning and for the least offense. Qualkaral, for some minor slight, felt her goddess withdraw her gaze from the outpost, casting her and her people to whatever fate they had earned. The drow realized at once the error in placing too much faith in Lolth's guidance. The magical compulsions keeping the muls in line corroded and fell away, and the freed muls turned their anger against their overseers. The muls ceased their work against stone and iron, and their picks tore into the soft flesh and bone of the dark elves.

The muls destroyed their masters, shattered the drow city, and escaped, blinking, into the bright light of the surface world. They spread across the land as a sundered people, drifting and shiftless, to find places for themselves along civilization's fringes or in the untamed wilds where they became bandits, mercenaries, and wanderers. The muls are rare, of course, but wherever they tread, legend follows.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Into slavery the first muls were born, and the chains and collars that once bound them chafe them still, even though they tore themselves free long ago. Muls possess an ingrained loathing for tyranny and authority, and they prove intractable allies by being stubborn and resistant to anyone who would control them. They count slavers as their greatest foes, and many kill such scum on sight, even if it means their own death.

Slavery's effects can shape a mul's outlook, but they have shame as well. Most muls know the origins from which they were born, understanding they are children of dark magic and evil intent. Many muls burn with anger at what was done to their ancestors and use it to find the strength they need to overcome adversity. Others are embarrassed at who they are and are never quite comfortable in their skin. These latter muls go to great lengths to hide their unusual appearance.

Muls might be uncomfortable about their heritage, but most have at least some passing interest in the culture and people from which they descend. Muls mingle with humans freely, curious about their ways and manners. They approach the dwarves, on the other hand, with some reluctance; many dwarves shun them as abominations, and only the most open-minded dwarves can bear to acknowledge muls as kin.

When it comes to deities, the muls are suspicious. They, like their dwarf cousins, are able servants for

the gods, but many muls regard such service as only a step removed from slavery. The only god many have known is Lolth, and only the most wicked muls find in her a suitable patron. Doubtless many "half-dwarves" blame the gods for their sorry birthright. For these reasons, most muls have little interest in the deities. The rare few who overcome their anger favor gods of battle, strength, victory, and justice, meaning that Kord and Bahamut are the most popular deities.

Muls have no mercy for those who count themselves as an enemy. Fury drives them forward to dispatch their foes with the same brutal efficiency they cultivated in the mines. They hack through their opponents with a savagery many find unsettling. Muls despise weakness, and cravens bear the worst of their attacks.

Muls are slow to trust others. They consider it wisest to place faith in themselves. When muls do form friendships, they are long and lasting. No matter how they are tested, such bonds, once forged, are hard to break.

Mul Communities

Muls have no sense of community with their own kind and thus raise no towns or settlements. Instead, they find their way to larger towns and other places where they can become lost in the diverse crowds of nationalities and races. Muls favor human lands to dwarven ones, but they can be found in both where, if not welcomed, they are at least tolerated. Local customs intrigue muls, and if they can live peacefully in their adopted lands, they might take up the beliefs and attitudes held by their neighbors. They abide by the laws as most do, but should the laws be overly taxing, muls are the first to rise up against their oppressors.

Mul Adventurers

From the moment they broke free from the Underdark, muls have roamed the lands, searching for a place to belong. Many do settle down in the towns and villages they come across, but more than a few take up the adventurer's life, finding glory, treasure, and power along the way. These accomplishments are accepted, but rarely are they the purpose for which muls adventure. Instead, they might crave vengeance against their ancient enemies, fight to prove they have a place in the world, or scour the lands for meaning.

As mentioned above, the gods have little appeal to mul adventurers and many eschew them altogether. For a mul to make a god's aims his or her own and become a divine servant takes a profound revelation. Religious muls can become fanatics, favoring any class that puts their assets to good use. The few who follow that path can find great success as avengers, battle clerics, avenging paladins, and wrathful invokers.

The heavens might hold little appeal for muls, but their scorn does not extend to the world around them. Muls seem drawn to the primal spirits—those essences uncaring of their pedigree or past deeds—and they find in muls strong allies to protect the unspoiled wilderness. In this capacity, muls become rageblood or thunderborn barbarians or, for those who can control their anger, take up the warden's path. Enlightened and mystically inclined muls also make powerful shamans, seekers, and druids.

Muls who find places in civilization might pursue other avenues. Their natural hardiness and grit leads many to pursue martial classes. As fighters, rangers, and warlords, they can join military outfits to protect their new homelands. Those with psionic talent often become battleminds and perform in the same capacity.

Arcane magic is mysterious and distrusted by most muls. They have little talent at wizardry and might scorn its use. The one exception is the mul warlock. Muls might find meaning in the vestiges of their ancestors, in the dark between the stars, or even in the diabolical powers of the Nine Hells.

Roleplaying a Mul

You have known hardship your entire life. Your past is likely one of endless challenges and cruelties—a series of terrible experiences you only just escaped. These dark times shape your outlook. You might be hard and unforgiving or melancholy and somber. You might indulge in excessive drink, play, and other pleasurable pursuits, or you might deny yourself these things, living the ascetic's life to cleanse yourself of the shame your existence suggests.

Mul Backgrounds

The background elements below highlight different explanations for how you might incorporate muls into your game.

Driven to Vengeance: Winning freedom was a start, but it wasn't the end. What use is it to be free when the tyrants will just scoop up another people and subject them to the same evils? You commit yourself to eternal war against the ones that bred your race, naming drow (mind flayers, sorcerer-kings, derro, or something else) as your paramount foes. Can you show mercy to these people? If so, under what circumstance? To what extent will you go to fight them?

Associated Skills: Dungeoneering, History

Associated Languages: Deep Speech, Draconic, Elven, or Giant

Lost Drifter: Since gaining your freedom, you have been adrift, unable to settle down and make yourself a home. How did you escape your captivity? What drives you now? What stops you from settling down? What is a cause for which you could fight?

Associated Skills: Nature, Perception

Merciless Brigand: Freedom is sweet, but surviving is sweeter. You fled into the wilds and lived as a bandit for a time. Were you a loner or were you part of an outlaw band? Why did you choose this path instead of honest work? Your new life as an adventurer suggests you broke with this career. What made you change?

Associated Skills: Intimidate, Stealth

Sword-for-Hire: Fighting and toiling are the only things you know. Luckily for you, something always needs fixing and someone always needs killing. What sorts of masters have you served so far? Is there anyone for whom you won't work? What kind of mission would it take for you to refuse payment?

Associated Skills: Athletics, Intimidate

Mul Feats

In addition to the feats described in the *Dark Sun Campaign Setting*, the following feats are available to any mul character that meets the prerequisites.

Born in Darkness

Prerequisite: Mul

Benefit: You gain a +2 racial bonus to Dungeoneering checks. In addition, you gain low-light vision.

Eager Charger

Prerequisite: Mul, barbarian, *swift charge* power

Benefit: You gain a +1 racial bonus to speed when charging. In addition, you gain a power bonus to the damage roll of the charge attack granted by your *swift charge* power equal to your Constitution modifier.

Fearsome Toughness

Prerequisite: Mul, fighter, *incredible toughness* racial power

Benefit: When you use *incredible toughness*, each enemy adjacent to you is marked by you until the end of your next turn.

Relentless Battle Fury

Prerequisite: Mul, fighter

Benefit: Whenever you make a damage roll while you have maximum hit points, you gain a +2 bonus to that roll.

Spirit of Courage

Prerequisite: Mul, shaman, *incredible toughness* racial power, *call spirit companion* class feature

Benefit: When an ally uses his or her second wind while adjacent to your spirit companion, that ally can end one dazing, slowing, or weakening effect on him or her.

Strength from Anger

Prerequisite: Mul

Benefit: Whenever you end the dazed, slowed, stunned, or weakened condition with a save, you gain a +1 bonus to the next attack roll you make before the end of your next turn.

Sturdy Toughness

Prerequisite: Mul, *incredible toughness* racial power

Benefit: When an effect knocks you prone or pushes, pulls, or slides you, you can use an immediate interrupt to expend *incredible toughness*. If you do, you ignore the forced movement or remain standing.

Unstoppable Fury

Prerequisite: Mul, *incredible toughness* racial power

Benefit: You can expend *incredible toughness* to end an immobilizing effect on you.

Unstoppable Transformation

Prerequisite: Mul, *incredible toughness* racial power, *wild shape* power

Benefit: When you use *wild shape*, you can expend your *incredible toughness* to gain a power bonus to damage rolls until the end of your turn. The bonus equals your Constitution modifier.

About the Author

Robert J. Schwalb is an award-winning game designer who has contributed design to or developed over one hundred roleplaying game titles for Dungeons & Dragons, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *A Song of Ice and Fire RPG*, *Star Wars RPG*, and the *d20 system*. Some of his more recent work for Wizards of the Coast can be found in *Player's Handbook 3*, *Martial Power 2*, and *Draconomicon 2: Metallic Dragons*. In addition, he's a regular contributor to both *Dragon* and *Dungeon* magazines. Robert lives, works, and will probably die in Tennessee.

Grifnar's Arms

By Mike Mearls

illustration by Arnie Swekel

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Grifnar's Arms is a small weapon shop and smithy tucked away down a side alley in a medium-size or larger town or city. A sign hanging above the door depicts a troll crouched over a bubbling cauldron, with two stubby arms bobbing in the stew. Anyone viewing the sign instantly realizes that the arms are Grifnar's, even if they have never met the dwarf. The thought pops into the mind, unbidden but unshakeable.

The shop is crafted from expertly fitted stone blocks and resembles a giant, stone cube. There are no windows and only a single, iron door with a view slit directly beneath the sign. Its teetering, brick chimney is the shop's only distinguishing trait–from the outside.

The interior of the shop is dominated by a forge and various tools, along with ingots of iron, copper, and other metals. A trapdoor leads down to a storage chamber where Grifnar keeps his wares on display. His 'showroom' is in the basement because it's more secure and stays cooler than the rest of the shop. The dwarf crafts mundane items and common magical weapons of up to 10th level.

The dwarf Grifnar is a grouch with a long, gray beard. He is balding and is almost always covered with a layer of soot streaked with sweat. His teeth are crooked and discolored, and his unfortunate diet gives his breath a noticeable pungency (he is convinced that eating raw onions wards away the undead). Grifnar wears ragged pants, hobnail boots, and a shabby tunic beneath his leather apron.

The dwarf's personality matches his appearance. He tries to be personable when there's potential for a sale—he escorts buyers into his basement showroom and fawns over them while displaying his wares—but his personality often overpowers his intentions, so even his best behavior can be gruff. When not trying to exercise restraint, he is crass, loud, aggressive, and lacking in any shred of tact.

Grifnar's greatest fault is his disdain for elves, which manifests in a blistering contempt that he struggles unsuccessfully to reign in. The sign above his shop is a "gift" from Aldanian, an elf who crafts and sells implements in town. Aldanian enchanted it so that Grifnar sees his proud coat of arms with two axes crossed over a shield, just as it's always been. All other folk see a hungry troll about to snack on Grifnar's limbs. The dwarf has no idea that Aldanian swapped out his original sign for this one. Pointing it out to him only confuses him.

Grifnar's apprentice is named Gromdol, a young dwarf indentured to Grifnar by his clan. He hopes to learn enough from the old dwarf to return home and forge weapons for use against the giants and orcs that menace his people. Gromdol has brown hair and a short beard. Unlike Grifnar, he is quiet, polite, and easygoing. He will try to warn new customers not to talk about the sign, if anyone appears about to mention it.

Anointed Mace

"If you are an acolyte of the gods, my friends, you will find no better weapon than this. And if you trust in the gods, clearly you need all the help you can get. Trust in yourself, that's what I say. And trust in my weapons, of course! What, did I say something wrong? I mean no disrespect. Clearly this is my personal belief. Perhaps you would like to speak to me of the gods? I have plenty of time to learn of your faith, maybe after you have made a purchase? Surely you can see the value of this weapon. The power captured within it is particularly deadly to the undead, while it also aids in channeling divine magic."

Anointed Mace — **Level 3+ Common**

This steel mace is scribed with several runes of divine power. One side of its crushing end is marked with a rune of life, the other with a rune of final endings for the restless dead.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Weapon: Mace
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 radiant damage per plus.
Property: You gain a +1 item bonus to attack rolls against undead creatures with this weapon.
Property: Whenever you reduce an enemy to 0 or fewer hit points with this weapon, a bloodied ally of your choice within 5 squares of you regains hit points equal to this weapon's enhancement bonus. If you are bloodied, you can choose to regain the hit points instead of the ally.

Axe of Sundering

"Here, my friends, we have the finest axe of dwarven make. Careful now with that cutting edge! Just last week a poor half-orc nearly sliced his thumb off when he was fool enough to test its edge. My people crafted these weapons to aid in their siegecraft. No door or wall can withstand this axe's strike. Yes, yes, even stone my friends. Gromdol, fetch a brick from next door, these discerning customers need a demonstration. Oh, and if you plan on delving into an old tomb, this is the weapon for you. Not only can it smash through locked doors, but its effects extend to creatures animated by magic. Skeletons, zombies, even golems are no match for it!"

Axe of Sundering — **Level 2+ Common**

This heavy axe looks battered and old, but the slightest touch shows that its cutting edge is sharp and true.

Lvl 2	+1	520 gp	Lvl 17	+4	65,000 gp
Lvl 7	+2	2,600 gp	Lvl 22	+5	325,000 gp
Lvl 12	+3	13,000# gp	Lvl 27	+6	1,625,000 gp

Weapon: Axe
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus, or +10 damage per plus against objects and animates.
Property: You gain a +2 item bonus to damage rolls on attacks made with this weapon against animates. Your attacks with this axe made against objects deal maximum damage.
Level 12 or 17: +4 item bonus.
Level 22 or 27: +6 item bonus.

Chieftain's Weapon

"A great leader requires two things: fine warriors to command and a stout weapon to lead the charge. Perhaps you still need competent companions; I have no idea how well these other guys fight. Perhaps you should hire a few dwarf mercenaries? But if you are a looking for a weapon, search no more. The magic within this weapon fills your allies with a cunning

sense of battle. When you urge them to strike, its magic aids their accuracy."

Chieftain's Weapon — Level 3+ Common

This long spear's haft is covered with runes, each linked together to form a chain that runs in a spiral along its length.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Weapon: Polearm, spear
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus.
Property: Whenever you grant an ally the ability to make a melee or ranged basic attack, that ally gains a +1 item bonus to the attack roll.

Flail of Winds

"Many folk expect that we dwarves know only fire and earth, but many of us have studied the secrets and magic of the other elements. Take this flail, for instance. Now and again, a vein of iron ore becomes exposed to the elements at the uppermost reaches of a mountain. The howling storms that whip around the peak impart their magic to the metal. A smith as skilled as me can draw forth that magic to craft a weapon which imbues your attacks with the power of wind. With the right tactics, you can send your opponents crashing across the battlefield."

Flail of Winds — Level 3+ Common

This flail's bludgeoning head is scribed with runes of elemental magic. The runes form creases and grooves along its head. When swung, it emits a whistle like a howling wind.

Lvl 3	+1	680 gp	Lvl 18	+4	85,000 gp
Lvl 8	+2	3,400 gp	Lvl 23	+5	425,000 gp
Lvl 13	+3	17,000 gp	Lvl 28	+6	2,125,000 gp

Weapon: Flail
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus.
Property: If an attack made with this flail causes a forced movement effect, increase the distance of that effect by 1 square.

Hammer of Victory

"Did you know that my people have produced some of the greatest bards of this era? Yes, it is true, and I don't appreciate your laughter. We dwarves love music! Just not the wheedling titters of elves about forests and prancing unicorns. We sing about victory in the face of certain defeat, of battles against unspeakable odds, and the glory of the dwarven legions. This hammer is imbued with such songs. As your foes cower before you, its music roars forth as a peal of thunder to knock your enemies to the ground."

Hammer of Victory — Level 4+ Common

This hammer's striking head is carved with an intricate scene depicting dwarven warriors cleaving through a goblin horde.

Lvl 4	+1	840 gp	Lvl 19	+4	105,000 gp
Lvl 9	+2	4,200 gp	Lvl 24	+5	525,000 gp
Lvl 14	+3	21,000 gp	Lvl 29	+6	2,625,000 gp

Weapon: Hammer
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 thunder damage per plus.
Property: Whenever you reduce an enemy to 0 or fewer hit points with this weapon, all enemies adjacent to you are knocked prone.

Raider's Crossbow

"Archery, fah! That's for cowardly elves. Present company excepted, of course. I'm sure that attacking from a distance is wise, in your case. I mean, archery is a noble path for a warrior. It is only cowardice such as elves display—present company excepted—which I take issue with! Surely a warrior as skilled as you can see that pressing the attack is the key to victory. This crossbow is the perfect weapon for the aggressive warrior. Dwarf explorers use it to slay their enemies before they even know an attack is at hand. While others gape and fumble for their weapons, this crossbow fires straight and true. Many a battle has been won before it's even started, thanks to this fine weapon in fine, dwarvish hands."

Raider's Crossbow — Level 5+ Common

This compact crossbow is light and easy to handle.

Lvl 5	+1	1,000 gp	Lvl 20	+4	125,000 gp
Lvl 10	+2	5,000 gp	Lvl 25	+5	625,000 gp
Lvl 15	+3	25,000 gp	Lvl 30	+6	3,125,000 gp

Weapon: Crossbow
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus, or +1d10 damage per plus during a surprise round.
Property: During a surprise round, you gain a +2 item bonus to attacks with this crossbow. After you attack with this weapon during a surprise round, you can shift 3 squares as a free action during that turn.

Shielding Blade

"Ah, you are wise enough to spot my finest blade. Notice the heavy cross guard. The magic within this weapon shall guard your hand unerringly to block and parry. A giant's club? Knocked aside like an elf's dagger! The power within this fine sword deflects attacks and sharpens your defensive skills. You'll have no need for a shield with this weapon in hand. I've seen a warriors slice arrows in half and even deflect scorching rays of magical energy with this weapon."

Shielding Blade — Level 4+ Common

This sword's broad cross guard is larger and thicker than normal, but a few practice swipes with this weapon show that it is still perfectly balanced.

Lvl 4	+1	840 gp	Lvl 19	+4	105,000 gp
Lvl 9	+2	4,200 gp	Lvl 24	+5	525,000 gp
Lvl 14	+3	21,000 gp	Lvl 29	+6	2,625,000 gp

Weapon: Heavy blade, light blade
Enhancement: Attack rolls and damage rolls
Critical: +1d6 damage per plus.
Property: You gain a +1 shield bonus to AC.

About the Author

Mike Mearls is the Group Manager for the Dungeons & Dragons® roleplaying game. His recent credits include *Player's Handbook 3*, *Hammerfast*, and *Monster Manual 3*.

Watchers at the Living Gate

By Paul Park

Illustration by Eric Belisle

He lived with his own kind in the forest, away from the towns of the human world, because of what he was. But once a year since he was small he'd come away to the ruined city on the mountainside where his own people never ventured, nor full-blooded humans either, a place of old magic and old defeats. That first time he'd been hunting on the cliff-top, and a wounded ram had led him far from home. In a bowl of mist and leaning stones he brought it down, a lucky shot with the small bow, but already he heard the hounds yelping behind him. Before he could claim the kill he had been whipped away by men on horseback, shouting and cursing the mother who had borne him. Some dismounted and threw stones. Helpless, he had watched them pull the ram away, his arrow still lodged in its throat.

When he ran away it had not been in shame or fear so much as rage. Toward sunset he came out on the mountainside above the clouds and watched the red light cut across the rocks amid the tussocks of coarse grass. There was the fallen gate, its stone posts inscribed with runes he couldn't read, not yet. Beyond it, he came into the first of the ruined streets, the ruined houses built into the cliff-side.

Carved statues lined one avenue. Some had lost their arms, legs, heads, but even so he could see a vision of ideal beauty in the broken stones. He paused to study the statue of a boy about his age, yet more beautiful even than a human child, tall and slender, with long eyes and delicately pointed ears. The statue stood at the lip of a stone pool, gesturing down into its depths, and in the last rays of the setting sun the living boy squatted over it and saw reflected in its surface, as carefully as in any mirror, his own distorted features, his heavy jaw, protruding teeth, mashed nose, bulbous eyes under heavy ridges of bone. In such circumstances even the small attempts at decoration, the shards of broken glass that his mother had tied lovingly into his shaggy hair, appeared to mock him as they caught the light.

Then it was dark. He looked around for the door of a stone hall that still retained some of its roof. Now suddenly the black doorways seemed menacing. Who knew what ghosts and spirits prowled these ruins, who had died here when the city fell? Instead, shivering with cold, he stayed beside the pool, until the moon rose behind the shattered peaks, and moonlight struck the surface of the pool.

That was the first time he had seen her. Every year since then he had returned, when the first full moon of summer fell into the water. He had changed since that first time, grown in stature and in skill, but she never changed. Always she stroked to the surface as if swimming up from underneath, from some submerged tunnel, he had thought at first.

Then, because he was a boy, he had worshiped her as a boy does a woman, worshiped her goodness, as he imagined it, striven to be worthy, and to fulfill every command. Later, full-grown, his shoulders tattooed with his clan's symbols of manhood, his ears pierced with iron rings, he had moved into another kind of worship, as she stood with the water to her knees, her body clothed in wet silk, and a phosphorescent sheen that had followed her from the depths. Later still, reckless, he had staggered down into the pool, only to find himself enmeshed in weeds, while she pulled laughing away. "How ugly you are! How is it possible for a living creature to be so ugly? You disgust me—truly, you disgust me." But when he was exhausted and discouraged she came close to him again, and with flashing eyes she told him once more what he must accomplish to prepare himself. He'd done everything she'd asked.

These commandments, as if from a goddess, had led him far from his own people. Not for him the brawls between the clans, the comforts of marriage and children. Instead he lived with his widowed mother in the forest, away from the clan's hearth, despised, he imagined, by the purebreds in his village. With a dedication born of rage, he studied human lore. He learned the languages of men and other creatures. He studied old books by candlelight, and parchment scrolls from the libraries of the abandoned city. He spoke the words the goddess brought to him until the trees came alive. And in the spring he cut his totem stick from a piece of bone, and carved the length of it in a pattern of braided hair, and fashioned its knob in the shape of a wolf's head, with lumps of agate for its eyes.

On the night of the full moon he slept most of the day. His mother woke him for supper, as he had requested. Yawning, he sat down on a mossy rock in the middle of the stream, washed his body, shaved his face, combed his hair and knotted it with iron beads. Then he dressed himself in the clothes he had laid out the night before, his father's shirt, made from doeskin as fine as linen, salvaged by his mother after he'd left them, mended and patched over the years. The tribe wore furs and harder, heavier leather when they wore anything, but she had kept this human garment for the wedding of her half-human son.

Now she brought him porridge and blood sausage from the fire. She stood watching him, holding the food in a wooden bowl. Long before, she had learned not to question his choices, because it was common for the men in the village to abandon their old mothers and fathers to the wolves, the totem of their clan, when there were too many mouths to feed. But her son was a powerful hunter. Others claimed to see the deer and elk search for him in the meadows and the woods, and lay their horned heads in his lap.

"Haggar," she said.

He looked up smiling into her coarse and wrinkled face, until he noticed that her eyes were bright with tears. "Don't worry."

"I'm not worried. But you are going far away."

He expected some sort of complaining then, and when it didn't come he started to say all the things that he'd rehearsed in order to forestall her: "I won't be long. I've left seven necklaces of iron cash. In the digging pit there's a wooden box with agates and opals you can sell in town. Humans love them for their games. The smokehouse is full of meat and fish."

But when she said nothing about any of that, he stood up to comfort her. "I won't go far," he said, which was a lie, the first he'd ever told her.

"There's my cousin," she said, referring to a girl in the village. "She waits for you."

When he put his arms around her, she relaxed into his chest. "Me, too," she said, fingering the bone buttons of his father's shirt.

Later, as it got dark, he left the encampment. Barefoot, he ran uphill through the woods. When the trees gave way among the rock piles, he clambered onto the ridge, then stood looking back for a moment at the firelight among the trees. It was the first night of the summer festival, and the men were lighting the bonfire in the charmed circle. They were already drinking their honey beer, and soon the women would dance to the rhythm of the drums, while the old shaman marked their foreheads from a bowl of blood—he'd never seen the ceremony. He missed it every year.

He stood on the ridge as the darkness gathered. "I know you're here," he said without turning round. The she-wolves picked their way over the stones, their heads low. He ran among them up the slope into the high meadow, among the red-star columbines. The wolves coursed after him but could not reach him, because as he ran he gripped his totem stick and muttered his evocations, until he could feel the coarse hair on his back and down his arms, and he dropped down to all fours.

Everything she'd asked he had accomplished, no matter what the sacrifice. Tonight she would understand that there was no remaining trace of the boy

whose shape had so disgusted her. She would recognize how love had changed him.

Before moonrise he paused at the stone gatepost on the mountainside, whose runes, he now saw, spelled out a name, or else part of a name: CENDR. The remaining letters on the other side had crumbled away, and the post itself had broken into pieces in the coarse grass. The wind had died. Black clouds hung above him, obscuring chunks of stars.

And when he saw the sky glow silver behind the eastern peaks, he picked his way down the avenue of statues, his feet delicate on the uneven stones. At the limit of his senses he could hear the noise of rats or rabbits in the empty houses; they would not show themselves. They would crawl into their crevices and holes, not knowing they were safe from him; he wasn't hungry. All day he had fasted, in preparation.

Finally he reached the rim of the stone basin and lowered his head to drink. But at the last moment he did not break the surface with his long tongue, and as the moon rose he saw his countenance reflected as in a mirror, his yellow eyes and cruel teeth. Baring them, pulling away his dark lips, he allowed his breath to trouble the water, while at the same time a small wind came out of nothing, following his secret command. It stirred the surface, sparing him the sight of his ugliness as he regained his mortal shape.

When the circle of the moon was bright in the water, he heard her laughter from the other side of the pool. She sat on the far lip of the basin, weeds in her yellow hair, which gleamed with phosphorescence. She was examining the bottom of one foot when she raised her head.

"Haggar," she said, her voice soft and musical, and he wondered if he'd ever told her his true name, and if not, how she came to know it. "So many years you've disappointed me. When I tell my friends, they laugh at me. But it's time to prove them wrong. I need your help. I have an urgent need. I hope things are different now."

So many years—nine years. During that time he had changed utterly in body and mind, but she had not changed. He stood in his leather breeches and his father's wedding shirt, his totem stick slung in his belt. Now she stood and beckoned, and as he stumbled forward, it occurred to him that he was older than she, or at least he looked older, a full-grown man. And at the same time he thought about what she'd said: she needed him. What for? Need, he knew, was different from love, however similar they felt. And friends—what friends? He'd always thought she was alone in the world, last of her race, of the people who had lived in the crumbling city, perhaps.

He paused, the water around his shins. She stood within a stone's cast away, one hand on her slim hip. She smiled at him, a mocking smile, he understood, and for the first time he listened to his doubts—he had learned much in the solitary study of his craft. He knew the evocations that summoned clouds and rain, and those that summoned lightning from the sky. He had his hand on the druidic chain of being that linked all beasts with the primal spirit, and he knew the evocations that would pull him closer to that spirit up the evolutionary links, so that he could find the dividing lines, and sink back down again into another body, bird, or fish, or reptile, or warm-blooded beast. And though he had the practical mind of his mother's people, he could not have learned these things without some knowledge of the rest, of other worlds or planes that joined to this one in small places, of the Feywild and the crystal towers of Cendriane, where the eladrin had once lived, tall and proud and slender, but blind in their suspicion that all other races were animals to be used. Worse than humans in that way.

"When I tell my friends. . . ." Now suddenly he imagined her not as a solitary gift to him, but as an emissary from that world. He took a step backward, and at the same time watched the smile fade from her lips. How had she known his name, and not even his clan name but the secret name his mother called him? For an instant he imagined his mother's cottage in the woods, and heard in his mind's ear the drums of the summer festival, and saw the bonfire and the women dancing among the trees, among them Uruth, his mother's cousin, but younger than him, a sweet girl with big eyes, but not beautiful, not like this.

Her smiled dwindled as she saw his doubts. She stood with her hand on her hip, while the moonlight spread across the surface of the water. "Catch me," she said, and she dived into the depths—the pool was deeper than it looked, he knew. With a cry, he dived in after her, struggling to follow, to seize her as she swam down. For an instant he thought he'd clasped her in his arms, but then she'd slipped down deep, the wet silk slippery as eelskin. The water was murky, suffused with light, and he saw nothing.

His lungs were bursting, but he held his shape. He knew this was a test, a last test, and if he failed it she would not come again. Last year he'd tried to follow her down, and in the hole at the bottom of the pool where the current changed and the water turned cold, he'd lost his nerve. Defeated, desperate, he had clawed his way up to the surface again.

But now he saw a glimmer down below, and imagined her small feet kicking through the weeds. He imagined diving down to her, touching her body with his outstretched fingertips as she twisted away. He

imagined he would drown and die rather than lose her, and with all his strength he struggled grimly, even as he felt the weeds clutch at his legs. Below him in the phosphorescent depths of the pool he saw a shadow flicker, and with his lungs empty, his brain starved of air, he toiled down into the glow, first green, then blue until it burst around him, and he realized he'd been swimming upward to the light, and had broken through the surface of another pool, under another sky.

And even so he might have drowned, because he found himself almost too exhausted to move, and too depleted to breathe, except the water was shallow where he was. On his hands and knees, he dragged himself up a surface of smooth, blue-green tile until he lay at her feet.

The sunlight blinded him, it was so bright. The air was too rich to breathe. He had a vague impression of her standing over him, speaking not to him but to someone else: "Humor me. I didn't choose him for his looks. Take him and put him with the others. Leave him his rags until we find him proper clothes. And be careful. He doesn't look it, but he has some skill. That's why he's here."

Haggar rolled onto his back, forcing his eyes open, so that he could peer up through his lashes at the azure sky, so terrible and deep. He forced his ears and nose to open, fuzzily aware that if he tried to protect himself from the intensity of colors, sounds, and smells that distinguished this place, he would lose any hope of commanding nature here, as he could at home. Ignoring the long hands that snatched his wolf stick from his belt, he murmured an evocation. Leaving his body to be mauled and harried by the eladrin, he cast his mind into the air until he hung suspended far above, and looked down with an eagle's eye on the small group of struggling figures at the edge of the tiled pool.

This projection of himself, this imaginary eagle, was not capable of astonishment. Otherwise he would have been amazed to see the extent of the ruined city below his claws, the height of the crystal spires that soared up past him. The city lay not in a mountain bowl but at the edge of a sprawling forest that had overgrown it in a twisting mass of vines. What remained were buildings of prismatic stone, many of them perfect and untouched, as if the inhabitants had been called away momentarily to attend to something important, and left their doors standing open. But other parts of the city bore the traces of the powerful explosions that had destroyed it many years before, circular craters that contained structures not just ruined but pulverized, blasted to their foundations. Within these circles nothing lived, in contrast to the teeming life that overran the rest, life not just vegetable but animal as well: panthers and rodents and feral pigs, as well as monstrous insects, made huge, perhaps, by the lingering effects of a forgotten war.

There were no birds above him in the high, unnatural, purple and blue vault of the sky. Below, the eladrin were wrestling his body into a cart. He counted three of them besides the girl, and as they bound his arms behind him, he could tell they were nervous and unsure. He knew it from the language of their bodies, and because they were rougher than was necessary—he was offering them the resistance of a sack of potatoes, or perhaps a sack and a half. Nor could he explain their vicious pokes and jabs as just their natural contempt for him. No, the eladrin were in a hurry, and the horses, also, were skittish and shy. It was hard for him to judge the time of day from the color of the light, which was still too unfamiliar. He could not see the sun. But as he sank down into his body, he tried to imagine the reason for their haste as they pulled the horses over the jolting stones, down the Avenue of Gods—this name appeared to him intact, a memory from old maps. He knew that, like the corresponding street in the mortal realm, it cut across the city toward the eastern gate, and was embellished by its own double line of marble statues—many objects here, he knew, had their own pale resonance in the land he had left behind.

He lay trussed-up in the back of the cart, considering his options. Now that he had his bearings, it seemed to him that even without his totem stick, much could be done. Whatever these people were afraid of, he could use that fear against them. He started with a few small guttural evocations, which his captors might confuse with the sound of him coughing or spitting—they hadn't blindfolded him or bound his mouth. No, they had underestimated him, which was why he'd not resisted them. But that would change now, he thought, staring at the girl's beautiful face as she looked up into the sky. The breeze had freshened, and tendrils of dark vapor moved across the sky, while at the same time the front wheels of the cart fetched up against a root, whose heavy knee had split the paving stones. The driver spoke his own less-effective evocation as a single tendril broke out of the bark, and grasped at the wooden rim like a weak, small, pale green hand—it was enough. Before the horses could pull free, a half-dozen more had clutched the wheel, while vinelike clouds clutched at them from above—the Feywild, Haggar thought, was responsive to him. The force of nature was overwhelming here.

The sky darkened. Soon, he imagined, a bolt of lightning would spook the horses; already they refused to move, stood shivering with their ears back, while the driver hacked them with his whip. Two eladrin warriors had leaped out of the cart, and one stood guard while the other bent to cut at the new creepers with his sword. Neither of them had yet thought to connect him with what was happening.

The girl, however, was wiser than they. Alone in the cart with him, she bent down over him. Her yellow hair fell over her face and he could smell the scent of her, a perfume like cinnamon or clove. "Listen to me, you bird-brained pig," she murmured. "Let me explain. In half an hour it will be dark. Sooner if you persist. Even in twilight, we won't last ten minutes here. Lord Kannoth will open up the gates of his black palace, and he will hang our corpses from the trees. He has an army of undead soldiers who worship him as a god. Do you want to play your stupid games with him?"

"Free me," Haggar croaked. His voice was ugly even to himself.

She bent lower, so that she could whisper softly in his ear. "You stinking lump of excrement."

Above them the sky was black, and a foul mist had gathered. Rearing up, screaming with terror, the horses yanked at their traces and the cart fell to one side, kept from overturning by the swarming vines. The girl stepped to the ground and stood erect. She raised her cupped hands, filled now with a greenish light that ran down her naked arms and over her body, soaking her clothes until she herself was a radiant torch against the darkness. She drew her knife and cut the horses free of the vines, and in an instant they were quiet; they stood trembling, patient, their eyes wide, their nostrils rimmed with foam. Then she bent to hack at the creepers that held the wheel, and Haggar could feel the cold edge of the blade as if against his own skin. He had rolled down against the side of the cart, and there he found his totem stick discarded and wedged in a crevice between the knotted slats; the eladrin had thrown it there, not respecting him enough to keep it safe. Rolling against the wolf's-head knob, pressing his shoulder into it, he snarled an evocation and felt his body change. He felt the bone absorb into his body. The ropes slackened, and he bit at them until they gave way.

He no longer suffered the edge of the girl's knife. Instead, she'd turned away from him, walked a few paces down the road to illuminate a wider area. Her arms were upraised, and the knife glowed in her left hand. In the mist, Haggar could see she kept at bay an emaciated pale creature taller than herself, while the other eladrin, the two soldiers and the driver, cowered behind her. Shaking himself free of the last knots, he bounded from the cart and moved away into the darkness, only to turn when he heard one of the horses groan, a low gurgle deep in its chest.

Both animals had sunk to their knees in the stone road. A hideous spider, larger than a man, crouched above them. Snarling and cursing, Haggar did his best to clear the darkness he had made, conjuring up a wind to blow the mist away, break apart the clouds. But he knew that whatever he did, he would find the day had sunk to twilight. Whatever creatures lurked in the catacombs and forests of Cendriane, their feeding time had come.

But there was a full moon here too, or almost full, brighter than its counterpart in the mortal world. By its light, and the light cast by the girl, he could watch the spider wrap its kill in pale cords as thick as a man's wrist. In the other direction, toward the eastern gate, the way was blocked by a dozen or more of the undead, their bone-bleached skin luminous in the moonlight. Skeletal, with swollen heads and grinning jaws, they carried weapons of a type Haggar had never seen, swords that shone like crystal, and bows of yellow horn. One of them nocked a gleaming arrow, and in a moment the eladrin driver fell, shot through the eye.

Again Haggar paused, one forefoot upraised. This was not his fight. But then he saw another of the eladrin stumble to his knees, a sword through his belly. The final soldier was just a boy, and he fought bravely, his yellow hair badged with blood. But then one of the pale creatures pulled him down from behind, which left only the girl, twisting away from a behemoth with an axe, cutting him through the ribs and then shying back, her green fire diminished, almost extinct.

Haggar threw back his head and howled, and a single bolt of lightning hit the spike of the creature's axe, sending him sprawling. A peal of thunder shook the ground, and then Haggar was upon them, snatching the thin bones of the skeletons' legs. And when the girl fell, he seized hold of the collar of her shirt, gripping the weak cloth in his narrow jaws, dragging her away. At the same time a miasma of fog seemed to spill out of the ground, and the creatures, disoriented, hacked and stabbed at shadows, while a freezing wind surrounded them in a sudden squall of snow. Haggar backed away from them, dragging the girl over the icy stones, until they reached the gate at the base of the avenue, an enormous arch of carved and decorated marble, with friezes and embellishments of fighting beasts, and a squat, square, stone eagle on each corner of the roof.

On the other side of the arch, the moon rode high and unimpeded above the forest's edge. Not knowing if she was alive or dead, Haggar dragged the girl out through the gate, out of the city, and immediately found himself returned to his common form, a lurching half-breed orc, gesticulating impotently with his totem stick while the fingers of his other hand grasped at her torn collar. Back through the arch he could still see the blizzard, but here everything was still.

Or not quite. There was a sound of melancholy laughter. Then a man detached himself out of the shadow of the gate, and Haggar understood without knowing that this was Lord Kannoth, archfey ruler of the catacombs of Cendriane.

He was a man of middle height, dark, delicate, and slender, and dressed in a jacket of wine-colored velvet. His only weapon was a flower, a lily at the end of a long stalk. Bending down over the recumbent girl, he touched the lily to her brow, her lips. His voice was light and mocking: "When I first saw you, I thought perhaps you were an enemy to be feared, some wild lycanthropic berserker out of Brokenstone Vale. But in the moonlight, as you perceive, these illusions have melted, and here we are, a simple eladrin maiden, a cowering orc, and me."

As he spoke, the snow died away on the other side of the arch. The mist dissipated, and as far as Haggar could see, the Avenue of the Gods stretched unimpeded to the blue-tiled pool. The wreckage from the fight had been pulled away. The stones were white as chalk under the moon.

"Tell me," said the archfey. "Now that everything is still, and if you can remember, and if you have the wisdom to speak, what is the impulse that has powered all this violence? Don't worry," he said, as Haggar crouched over the girl's body, stretched out his hand and then drew it back. "She is asleep, waiting for you to wake her. It is love, is it not? It is love that has caused all this."

He didn't deny it. In slumber, in the moonlight, all the anger and contempt that had disfigured her were bleached away. She lay on her back, her hair away from her face.

"And what about her? What does she feel? An orc and a fey maiden—I must confess to you, a story such as this could touch my heart."

Haggar shook his head. Lord Kannoth smiled. "But that might change. You must not give up hope. Don't be afraid—she cannot wake unless you kiss her lips."

Haggar looked up in wonder into the archfey's pensive face. Again he put his hand out, pulled it back.

"Boy," advised Lord Kannoth. "It is a token of my good will. But do not make me wait. For only a few more moments will I consent to be amused."

And so Haggar closed his eyes, leaned forward, and placed the lightest possible kiss on the girl's lips. Instantly she came awake, and when she saw him, she twisted away as if he'd burned her. She turned her face to the ground and spat. "Pig!"

Lord Kannoth laughed. "This boy has saved your life. Show some gratitude, my child. Pride is nothing, beauty is nothing, compared to the virtues of an honest heart. Believe me, this I know."

With his lily wand, he pulled the hair back from his feral, delicate face. And wherever the flower touched, the skin changed. What had been pale and pure, in a moment was scorched and ridged, grotesque and distorted, with ragged lips pulled back in a grin. "Child," he said softly. "What's your name?"

"Astriana, my lord," she mumbled into the dirt.

"Astriana, that's a flower's name. Accept your fate, Astriana, as I have accepted mine. This is your husband. Do you understand me?"

Tears glistened in her eyes. "Yes, my lord."

"Speak the oath in your heart, where I can see it. Good. Then it is done."

He stood and turned away from them. The moon slid behind a cloud. When it came free again, Lord Kannoth had disappeared.

"Come," Haggar said, after a moment. "Let's leave this place. It's not safe to stay here."

A hundred paces from the road, the forest waited. "No one will harm us," murmured Astriana. "Are you so stupid that you did not hear? He gave his word."

She was weeping into her fists. She crouched in the road as he stood over her, embarrassed. There was no wind.

"Are you so stupid that you don't understand?" she continued. "You're my husband now. Anything you ask, I am sworn to deliver, especially on this night."

"That is not the custom of my tribe," he said.

Moaning into her hands, she didn't hear. "I am carefully punished. All these months I've used my own self to entice you, everything I am—I knew what I was doing. Why else would you have come?"

Then she looked up, her cheeks wet, her eyes glinting savagely. "What do you want? Don't keep me in suspense. Whatever it is, I am bound to give it, as a good wife should."

Standing in the bone white roadway, Haggar cleared his throat. He fiddled with his totem stick, picking with his thumbnail at the chunks of agate. "In my clan," he murmured humbly, "that is not the measure of a good wife."

She gave him a glance in which a moment of clear gratitude was immediately clouded with suspicion. "Easy to say. Are you so stupid that you can't understand what I'm offering you?"

He smiled, because he thought he understood how to disarm her. "Astriana," he said, and saw her flinch. "Woman," he amended, "this is what I want." Again she cringed away, as if from a blow. "I want to understand why you have brought me here, to this place. For nine years you made the journey to my world. 'Put him with the others,' you said, when I was lying in the cart."

She looked at him then, a long, slow stare. She wiped her nose on her sleeve and, eyes dry, clambered to her feet. "That's what you want?"

"That's what I want."

"I swear you're even stupider than I thought," she said, but then she smiled when he burst out laughing. "In the Feywild we are bound by our promises, you understand?"

He nodded.

"Then come," she said. "I'll tell you. It was not nine years for me."

She turned down the road into the forest. "What about your men?" he asked her. "Will you come back in the morning?"

"Who?" She shrugged. "They're gone. I hired them in the village."

"Even so. We should go back. One of them was just a child."

She gave him a look that suggested his stupidity had grown so powerful, it had become a force of nature like the ocean or the wind. "Besides," he said. "We have no weapons."

"That's not the place to search for them." She gestured with her hand. Looking back through the gate, he could see an enormous figure standing in the roadway near where they'd struggled over the cart. His shape was human, but his size was not.

"We have no choice," she said. "Lord Kannoth has taken everything, all our strength. It's a tradition. His gift to us."

Now suddenly she was in a hurry. She turned and ran down the gentle slope, and he followed her. She had spoken the truth: there was no strength in him, no trace of his totem animal. Heavier than she, he labored to keep up, as if the air of this new world were too rich for him to breathe.

After half a league, she stopped to draw breath under the forest's eaves. "How long?" he asked, after a moment.

"Until dawn tomorrow. It happened when I made my vow. It is the way of the eladrin, to come together without any skills or powers, as simple men and women on our wedding night."

He had the impression that she was mocking him. "Don't keep saying that."

"It gives me no pleasure to remind you. Nine months, it was, not years. Nine months I cast my hook into that pool. You're not the only fish I caught."

"I suppose not."

She studied his face as if, he thought, she were trying to memorize his ugliness. "Why aren't you angry?" she asked. "I would be angry at the things I say."

They stood beside a stone pillar at the entrance to the forest. It marked the border where the bleached dust of the roadway and its verges gave way to the darkness of the trees. Where the paving stones gave out and the road became a rutted track, two enormous oak trees stood as sentinels. "Kannoth's protection ends here," she said. She shrugged. "Even my knife is cold." She turned under the oaks and disappeared into the darkness.

He didn't know whether she was lying, or didn't understand her own powers, but she retained some luminescence in the dark, a greenish glow that led him onward. Without it, he'd have had to pick his way like a blind man, because the canopy of leaves denied all but an occasional shaft of moonlight, and the path was muddy, and wound among tangled masses of roots.

Soon the way steepened, and in some places they descended a cliff-face among evergreens, clambering down over wet boulders. Rivulets of water fell around them, and Haggar was astonished at the fecundity of this place, the denseness and intensity of life. Every place he put his hand or foot, living creatures squirmed or flopped or skittered away, and the air was thick with bugs, which got into his nostrils and his mouth. In the darkness, sounds and smells assaulted him with an almost physical pressure, a profusion of squawking and chittering and grunting and croaking, of sap and ash and mud and rotting wood.

But among all these he caught the tiny, evanescent perfume of cinnamon or clove, which he followed downward like a gleaming thread, hour after hour. Sometimes the scent of her would thicken, and he would find her waiting for him in some crevice or dell, her skin glimmering faintly. And at these moments as they rested, she would give him partial answers to the question he'd asked.

"I had to find some help," she said. "In the deep Feydark, where we are going, there is a portal called the Living Gate. For many generations, which means many hundreds of your years, a cohort of my people were its guardians. Over the years they relaxed their vigilance because the gate was shut, sealed in the old days. Even though we retain terrifying stories of the

days before the seal was place, still over time these legends lost their urgency, sank into myth."

He stood beneath an overhang of gnarled roots while she bent to scoop up a handful of water. A beetle scurried up his neck and he slapped at it. When he looked down she had disappeared, and he clambered after her through the boulders. It was only after half an hour, sitting on a fallen tree trunk in a broad forest of oaks, that he heard the continuation.

"So the traditions of the guardians became empty and ceremonial. It was a mark of honor at the Summer Court to be its captain. Last year a nephew of the queen achieved this post, a boy named Soveliss, and he used it to discover a way to break the seal, perhaps because he was curious about the world beyond the portal, the Far Realm. Perhaps for the glory of closing it again—we cannot question him, for he is dead, or worse than dead."

Her voice was a drifting whisper, and he had to lean in close to understand. She turned her head away. "Your breath stinks," she murmured softly.

The way grew steep again. In a crevice between enormous boulders, she paused. "At first, out of shame, he hid what he had done. He knew nothing of druidic lore, or any of our traditions. He was a boy flailing in the dark, and by the time he had confessed, most of my cohort was already destroyed. Nor was I able to recruit another, for the boy had been a favorite of the queen, and she refused to allow it. She was the one who suggested I go elsewhere, so as to find cruder folk. We are long-lived, and one of our lifespans is worth seven of yours."

"That is well-known," grunted Haggar. "The arithmetic is clear," he added, and Astriana smiled.

"It was my choice to train you as I did," she said.

He remembered the long hours by himself, the years of study. "You didn't train me."

She shrugged. "But I provided the spark." Then she was gone again and he hurried after, stumbling down through smaller trees with trembling leaves and pale branches, until he reached level ground, where he sank up to his shins in the water, and his bare feet disturbed minnows and frogs.

Then the trees gave out entirely, and he strode though waist-high bushes in the swamp. The moon was down behind the hills, and the first red glow of dawn was in the sky. From this new vantage point, and under this new light, he saw he stood in a bowl among high hills with the forest all around him. He saw for the first time that the way they had traversed, wild as it seemed, was not untouched by ancient architects and builders, for here at the bottom of the bowl, rising up out of the swamp, he could see the remains of ruined building, the stone foundations of colossal structures. Following Astriana's footsteps, he soon found himself on the lip of a sinkhole which, though it was topped with mud and grass, and though rivulets of water coursed over its edge and fell in endless streams, revealed itself under the pink light as a gigantic cylinder of stone masonry, whose circumference was a league or more, and whose bottom was obscure.

She stood on the brim of a waterfall, looking down. "We have arrived."

In the middle of this cylindrical well, rising from the bottom, was a tower, whose gabled roofs and turrets were far below them. A stone staircase spiraled down from where they stood, a quarter of the way around the inside of the well. It ended in a fortified buttress, from which a high bridge, a single wooden span, joined a crenellated terrace at the tower's top. Astriana had already begun to make her way down the steps, and Haggar followed; there was no rail or balustrade, and to their left yawned the abyss, an open maw of darkness with the tower as its tongue.

But after a quarter of an hour, they stood on the stone buttress at the bridge's outer end. Guards kept watch there, archers with long bows, and halberdiers. The captain saluted as they approached the bridge: "Lady Astriana, when you didn't return, Lord Themiranth decided to go anyway. Past midnight we brought some of them up again—another failure. Your two were the only survivors, though one has died since, I think."

"And Themiranth?"

"He did not return."

He was speaking to her, but he was looking at Haggar, his nostrils wide, his lips curled in disdain. "Is this orc your prisoner or your slave? I've got a cage full of his stinking kind."

She smiled. "Captain, this is Archdruid Haggar, Magister of the Broken Pool, master of all druids in the mortal realm. He has agreed to help us. Is that not so, magister?"

At that moment, above them, the first rays of the morning sun touched the inside of the well, revealing tendrils of vegetation that hung down from its rim over the black stones. And as if touched by Kannoth's flower, Haggar felt his strength return. Astriana faced him, and in the new light he noticed things he'd never seen before, either in the darkness at home when he had met her at the stone pool on the mountainside, or in Kannoth's bewitching moonlight, which had covered everything it touched with a light as thick as paint, hiding as much as it revealed. She stood just his height, a fair-haired woman in ragged blue-green silk, barefoot, with muddy legs. Like all

the eladrin, she appeared to have no pupils or whites to her eyes, which had a faintly yellow cast. Her wide mouth and forehead, her high cheekbones were beautiful to him—beyond beautiful—but at the same time he could see her flaws, the misshapen bridge of her nose, where it had been broken and reset, and the scar that ran over her cheekbone and her lips.

Suddenly embarrassed, he looked down at himself, the torn wedding shirt, which revealed his tattooed chest and shoulders, slick with sweat. " 'Magister,' that's a new one," chucked the captain. "Is this creature capable of speech?"

"It is you who should be silent," Astriana said. She turned, and Haggar followed her over the bridge into the tower. And she whispered to him as she walked through the guard chambers and tapestried corridors, so that he had to follow close behind her. "Among my people, it is customary for a man and wife to trade requests. You asked a question, and I answered. Now it is my turn. I want you to close this gate with me, and kill whatever creatures have crawled through from the Far Realm. Then it will be time for you to ask again."

"Anything I want?"

"Anything you want," she conceded, eyes fixed straight ahead. A pair of soldiers saluted then drew back in surprise when they saw Haggar. "One more thing," she continued without turning around. "You are not to speak of Lord Kannoth, or refer in any way to the magic he cast over us, or of the promise I made. These obligations can only be dissolved by the Summer Queen at the Court of Stars, whom I will petition as soon as we have done our work. That will be enough of an opportunity for my humiliation, as if I needed to dissolve a marriage with a pig or a goat. No, be quiet," she went on, as he tried to interrupt her. "Among my people, my ugliness is already a legend. The part of a seductress was a new one to me, not one I could accomplish here. Doubtless I enjoyed it. Doubtless that was part of Kannoth's joke."

They had come to the center of the tower, a circular chamber that also contained a well, the interior echo of the colossal architecture outside. And in the middle of the well was an iron cage suspended from a hook and pulley and reached by an iron ramp. Without pausing, Astriana climbed the ramp and climbed into the cage, where she stood holding the bars. Haggar entered behind her, and at a nod from her a pair of soldiers pulled the ramp away, leaving the cage dangling. Then another pair let down the chain; the cage descended down the length of the shaft, whose bottom was in darkness, invisible to Haggar as he peered between his filthy feet.

They passed storey after storey of iron balustrades, lit by glimmering lanterns. In time, Haggar guessed, they had penetrated below the foundations of the tower, and down into the rock. The air here was damp and thick. As they descended, he felt his mood darken also. Astriana said nothing during all this time, but only stood with her hands on the iron bars, embarrassed, he imagined, at having revealed so much. Now that they could talk freely without fear of being overheard, she was silent. Nor could he think of what to say. "This is my duty as your husband," he ventured finally, "to close this gate?"

She shot him a look of agonized contempt. "If Themiranth is dead, it is a blessing. Not once has he followed my command."

A bell clanged and the cage jerked to a halt, dangling and groaning at the end of its stupendous chain. They hung suspended in a natural cavern, with stalactites and stalagmites the length of a man. Down below, a platoon of soldiers labored secure them with long grappling hooks, and then to pull them to the edge of a metal structure, a wheeled staircase; when the cage grated against its iron edge, Astriana leaped onto it as if relieved not to be with him any longer in such an enclosed space, and sprang down the stairway, among soldiers very different from the eladrin in the upper tower. These were men in black armor, with hunched shoulders and heavy faces, stunted legs, and powerful arms.

They were inhabitants of the Feydark, Haggar guessed, firbolgs and goblins. One looked up, and he saw it was missing an eye. They clustered around Astriana as she descended the stairs, and she held out her hands, whether to welcome them or keep them at a distance, Haggar couldn't tell. They moved aside to let her pass, and she waited for him to catch up. "If the watch captain is right," she said, "we don't have time to lose. You will see."

Then she turned to speak to the one-eyed soldier in a language Haggar didn't know. "He says he's laid them in the antechamber," she summarized after a minute's talk. "Come."

They passed into a torchlit corridor, rough-hewn from the rock. And then through an iron door into a vaulted hall, at the far end of which two figures lay in nests of rags. Astriana hurried to them and went down on her knees.

One was alive and one was dead, as the captain of the watch had claimed. Astriana knelt over the living one, taking one of her hands and pushing the hair back from her face. A smoking lantern hung from an iron stanchion above their heads, and by its light Haggar examined the corpse of the other, a tiefling, he saw, with bosses of bone along the crest of his scalp, and curling horns that rose up from his brow,

one intact, the other lopped off at the base. The creature was dressed in jointed armor, and in his stiffened hand he still clutched a druid's staff, decorated with carved runes and also sheared off short. He lay on his back, and the straw and rags beneath him were soaked in his blood.

Fascinated, Haggar studied the man's face, his heavy beard, his red skin, paler now, he imagined, in death. He knew the history of this maligned and hated race, how ancient human families had sworn pacts with devils and corrupted their entire lines. "What did you promise him?" he asked.

Astriana didn't answer. The other woman was a shifter from the look of her, with a flat, feline face and jagged teeth. Hair grew on her cheeks and down her neck, and she was dressed in fur and leather. Or rather she had been, for she had ripped most of her clothing away with her long claws, and lay with her hairy body exposed. Her totem stick had fallen away from her and lay forgotten on the ground, a black shaft of tibia bone studded with uncut tigers' eyes.

She had raised herself onto one elbow and was talking to Astriana in low, urgent tones. Astriana scarcely seemed to listen, but instead she busied herself re-arranging the pillows so the shifter could lie more comfortably. And when the firbolg captain strode in, she turned on him. "Didn't I ask you to take care of them? Bring her to my guardroom, to my couch. Give her water mixed with wine."

"Lady, she's a—"

"Do not tell me what she is."

Later, she brought Haggar to a square stone chamber cut into the rock. Food and water had been laid on an iron table, roast capon, pepper sauce, and bread. They sat on iron stools. "To answer your question, I promised I would fill his boots with gold."

"And her?"

"An invitation to the court of the Summer Queen at Senaliesse. The thanks of her majesty. You see," she said, biting into a bone, "you work for cheap."

"I would not have come here for those things."

"Don't I know." And then after a pause: "Themiranth was a fool, but at least he did me this favor. No one will question my decision to bring druids from the mortal realm. The tiefling. You and the shifter. You have a toughness that the eladrin have lost, most of us."

She grimaced, then continued. "Themiranth said it was because I was most at home with outcasts and degenerates. Creatures more like animals. He said it was because none of my own kind would look at me. Because of my ugliness."

He said nothing, even though he imagined this confession cost her a great deal. He watched her take a gulp of water from a crystal cup. At first he'd been embarrassed to eat with her, until he'd noticed how messy she was, licking her fingers, wiping her mouth on her hand. She'd changed into new clothes, soldier's garb that was heavier and plainer than the thin silks she'd worn in Cendriane.

"Eat," she said. "You've had nothing, and you need your strength."

The chamber was lit with magical lights that burned with a hard, white flame. They were set in niches in the walls. Haggar leaned forward on his stool, and stuck his spoon into a wooden platter: grilled mushrooms in black sauce. "What do you know of the Far Realm?" she asked. "The Living Gate, that's where it leads. No—'leads' is not the word I want."

When he didn't reply, she frowned. "I told you how to find the texts to study these things. Months ago—years ago, for you. Because I knew I wanted you for this. So try and talk to me. Try to be cleverer than you are. The Far Realm is outside of time and space—"

Haggar interrupted. "The words we use to describe these things, we can't control them."

Astriana looked at him, grease on her lower lip. "So?"

"So—nothing. This is what I took from what little I read, before I forced myself to stop: It makes us vulnerable to think about these things. Outside time and space—what does that mean? Objects and creatures that we can't perceive. What we see is only indirectly, by its effect upon our minds. And this is corruption. Creatures from this world that are pulled from their true nature and transformed."

Astriana stared at him, chewing slowly. "That razorclaw shifter," she said. "Hazel is her name. She told me Themiranth and the others are still alive down there. Mindslaves. Servitors of something called an aboleth."

"Did she see it? How does she know its name?"

She laughed. "I told her." Then after a moment: "The important thing is sealing the gate. These creatures, the mind flayers and their slaves. They will try to prevent us."

She kept chewing, pointing at him with her chicken bone. "You and me."

And when he said nothing, she paused, looked down. "Because you promised."

He cleared his throat. "When we have done with this, I won't be content with any knowledge or coin or the worthless thanks of some archfey. The Far Realm is not the only thing that can't be thought of without damaging ourselves."

"So," she said, "you're saying we can use stupidity to protect ourselves. I suppose it's not so bad, to cultivate the minds of animals."

"It's what our people do," he said, not meaning orcs or eladrin, but followers of druidic knowledge from the dawn of time, before the higher races had evolved.

She smiled. The scar across her lips was livid in the dim light. "That's a lofty reason to have no plan at all. Eat," she said.

He chose a leg from the bowl of capon parts and brought it to his mouth, wondering if she could see his heavy teeth, the long tearing incisors, and if so, whether she'd grown accustomed to them. "Lord Themiranth and the others, I'm sure they were full of plans. Scholars of the Far Realm. Mindslaves now. After this, we won't think or talk when we fight against these creatures. Instinct only. Kick me if I have a thought." He stuck the legbone in his mouth and snapped it off.

"I'll kick you anyway," she said.

After they had finished, she left him for a few hours to rest. In a lighted alcove off the main chamber, he found a mirror set into the wall. Standing before it, he unbuttoned the remnants of his father's shirt and slipped it off, put it aside. He poured water from a crystal ewer over a linen towel, and used it to clean his body, wipe away the mud that obscured the tattoos on his hairy arms and chest.

Like all shape-shifters, he wore only leather, which absorbed into skin during the transformation, as did the bone of his totem stick. Doubtless Astriana at that moment was dressing herself in armor, choosing her swords and knives and spears, but he couldn't use any of that. Instead he stared at himself in the dim glass, while in his mind he allowed himself to climb the curving helixes of evolution away from his finished nature. These were the shapes he would take with him on this adventure, and he moved through them in the new air of the Feywild, to see if anything was different in this world.

He watched his jaw lengthen, and his neck grow thick, and slope down toward his shoulders, which swelled first and then receded as he sank down to all fours—a wolf, the totem of his clan. It was his most comfortable shape, but he didn't stop there. Instead he increased the pace of transformation, while in his mind he scampered up the ladders: the coarse hair thickened on his forearms, turned into quills, while at the same time a web of skin stretched from his shoulders to his wrists, and his jaw turned cruel and sharp. And then his feathers receded into patterned, oily skin, and the scales spread from his nose as his legs fused together and his arms clung to his sides, and he dropped down before the mirror in a coiling heap.

But he was curled up asleep in his wolf's shape when she returned. She was dressed in the war garb of a shiere knight in the Summer Court of Queen Tiandra, an armor of overlapping scales, alternating blue and green, made from carapaces of insects, lighter and tougher than steel, and so tight and fine that they covered her body like a second skin. Her hair was brushed back from her face and held at her nape with a silver ring. She wore ridged gauntlets of silver mail, and carried a mace in her left hand, while a long scimitar hung at her waist. In the dark alcove, her body seemed to glow.

"Time to move," she said, and he got to his feet and stretched, lowering his shoulders, letting his tongue loll out between his teeth. He followed her through the studded door and down through a warren of deserted ward rooms and low-ceilinged corridors.

In ordinary times, this place was full of life, the borderland between the Feydark and the surface world, where the fomorians of Harrowhame and the eladrin rangers of the woods maintained a queasy peace. This nest of warriors was now empty, but when Haggar and Astriana reached the endless staircases that led deeper into the guts of the rock, they found them packed with refugees, goblins and cyclopses and fomorians all crowding toward the surface, their possessions on their backs. And in their terror, all these pale citizens of the underworld had forgotten their differences, though they came from a dozen clans and races and competing powers. They waited in long lines so that they could pile on upward toward the sunlight, which many of them had never seen.

Hunchbacked women with bloated hands and faces carried their children on their backs, and they shrunk against the damp, black walls to allow Haggar and Astriana to pass, the last guardians of the Living Gate. Occasionally they touched their foreheads or else murmured some vestigial token of respect, before they bent to their burdens again and resumed their place in line. The wolf bounded ahead to clear the path, the long staircase that was lit not by torches or burning chemicals, but by glowing crystals in the rock, which shone blue and green and purple as they climbed down.

In time they came to Harrowhame itself, the dismal fortress of King Bronnor, built in an enormous cavern of quarried salt. They came out suddenly onto the salt floor, where the stone and iron ramparts rose above them. Here at least there was light and soldiers also, the myrmidons of the fomorian king. From the citadel there came the sound of drumbeats and brazen trumpets, which echoed from the crystal walls. But the gates were closed, and there was no guard to acknowledge them as they crossed the salt plain under the battlements to continue their descent.

They entered a gigantic fissure in the rock, where the ground sloped downward. And here the world

changed. Above, nearer the surface, the rock was cut, quarried, and dead. Here it was still alive, growing in a landscape as varied as any forest or mountainside. They climbed down through glowing forests of mushrooms. Animals lived here, snakes and lizards and rodents of all kinds, but also tiny deer and goats perched upon the rocks, and even a few pale birds. Flowering vines and creepers covered the distant walls, and hung from the stalactites above their heads. The air was lighter, richer here, and breezes wafted through the endless caverns, as if freshened from below.

The wolf loped ahead. They came to the shore of a black river and climbed the shattered rocks beside the waterfall. Haggar picked his way over the stones and paused at the first man-made structure he had seen in hours, a guardhouse built from black cubes of pumice stone, and lit with a guttering lantern. "Who is there?" Astriana called.

Her armor glimmered green and blue in the darkness, and she raised her silver mace. A man staggered out the open door, a firbolg warrior dressed in leather armor, carrying his sword. "You're here," he said. "Thank the gods. I've stayed alone for hours, waiting for them to come back. They've taken all my men," he added, pointing with his sword to a hole in the rock wall, lit from within by an unearthly mix of colors.

"Who?"

"Themiranth and the others. What's left of them."

He was a big man. Sweat glistened on his forehead. Raising his sword, making a gesture toward the depths, he said, "I was about to try again, one last time. There are too many of them if they come out in the open. But we can fight them in the tunnels, one by one."

"What's your name?" said Astriana.

"Garm, my lady."

"You're a brave man. Let's go down."

Finally they had reached the environs of the Living Gate, that tiny portal to the Far Realm. Its diameter could be measured in microns, yet even so, the substance that seeped through, less matter than deranged ideas, could poison a whole world. Once inside the last cave, they could see how all its surfaces were covered with a glistening slime, which sucked at their feet and made it hard to move. Yet it provided light for them; half a league in, they saw the first of the aboleth's servitors, the eladrin guardians it had bent to its will. One of them appeared suddenly, standing up out of the shin-deep slime, where he had been lying full-length.

"Themiranth," Astriana breathed.

His skin was transparent now, his organs and blood vessels mottled and visible, his staring eyes wide with unthinking malice. He wore no clothes, carried no weapons, but waded toward them with his arms stretched out, trying to wrap Astriana in his slimy grasp. She hacked at him with her mace, which made a wet, squelching sound as it sunk into his flesh; Haggar didn't watch. He had already begun his transformation, climbing down the curving ladder in his mind, until his body had lengthened many times, his arms and legs had disappeared, and he was slithering through the mucus-covered rocks, past Thermiranth and past the other eladrin servitors deeper down in the hole; they couldn't see him.

As he passed, he battered at their ankles with his blunt nose; one he knocked from his feet, and encircled with his tail as he pulled himself along, crushing out of him or her what still passed for life. He let go, then swam down where the slime was thickest, submerged in a paste or stew of half-dissolved corpses, until he found a corridor that was entirely packed with mucus, and he slithered through.

Just for a moment he saw the aboleth, with its wings and flanges and tentacles, its three red eyes in a vertical line; he closed his own eyes, closed his ears, let his mind sink down into its tiniest reptilian confinement, locked inside his flat little skull as if inside a prison made of bone, in the center of which he rolled his consciousness into a ball, as a prisoner might sit and hug himself on the floor of his cell, turning his face inward partly from despair, partly as a way to conserve his strength.

On the long dull surface of his body, along the smooth patterned skin of the great snake, he allowed himself to feel no sensation as he burrowed through the slime into the belly of the great beast, a belly that absorbed him as it allowed him to pass, and sucked him down into a landscape of inflamed viscera, mucus-encrusted tunnels full of parasites.

Even with his mind shut down, and sunk into his body as far as he could permit it without letting go of the synapses and ganglia that controlled his breathing and his heart, still he caught a vague impression of Astriana and Garm up to their knees in effluent, hacking and pounding at the parasites that tried to drag them down.

Then Haggar was past them, and had slipped down through the submerged tunnels yet again, and glimpsed again the red eyes of the aboleth, and sunk through the membrane of its body yet again.

Here in the heart's core of the monster he discovered the Living Gate, the portal to the Far Realm. Contagion seeped from it, a tiny valve of puckered flesh in the contracting wall. Another monster lurked here, floating in a substance that was neither solid nor

liquid nor gas, a creature made of writhing tentacles around a single flaming eye. Daggerlike teeth circled its maw, and Haggar found himself drifting toward it in his natural form, naked save for his totem stick, which protruded from the bone of his forearm. It was as if this creature could perceive his true essence after all, and limit him to his weakest shape.

Gouts of fire burst from the monster's eye. But Haggar had his totem stick, and with it he began to stir the substance of the deep, grunting muffled evocations as he did so, until the matrix that surrounded him began to move, assume a shape like a vortex or tornado; he was controlling it, as he would a cloud or a storm in his own world. The streamers of fire circled back, catching the monster in a net of its own flame, while at the same time the living gate spread open, and a single purple tentacle stretched through it. This was the mind flayer, the last of the horrors that awaited him here, and it searched for him diligently, penetrating through the ooze, grasping for his head. Doubtless just beyond the gate was the encrustation of the elder brain that was commanding this entire web of illusion and deceit.

He kicked away and it grabbed hold of him. Inside the prison of his mind, a long hand snaked through the bars, because he was afraid. He sat naked, curled up in the center of his cell, allowing the hand of the mind flayer to palpate his skull, searching for a place to enter. He felt a rush of emotion and sensation surge up through him, and his mind was full of pictures of the past and present and the future: His mother standing by the fire outside her cottage in the woods. The pool in the abandoned city on the mountainside, and Astriana standing in it with the water around her knees. Astriana with her mace held high, breaking the flesh of the slime-covered servitors, while he failed here, allowed the mind flayer to take him and destroy him, destroy them all.

But then with a last effort of his reptile will, he choked all that away, constricted the mental passages it flowed through, that sequence of images, and his mind went dark. Those processes of the brain and heart were what the creature fed on, and Haggar felt its grip loosen, its probing tentacle release its hold.

Instead of struggling, he forced himself to relax, to welcome the touch of the jailer's hand upon his face. And the more he welcomed it, the more he emptied his mind of panic and regret, the weaker and less sure was its grasp, while at the same time he was climbing downward into a new reality, in which he stood in his wolf's form at the edge of a rocky, fetid pool under a blood red sky. There was some kind of twisting mollusk down there, a cephalopod with purple tentacles, and he stretched out its claws and ripped along its flabby, unprotected head.

He heard a scream, all the more horrifying for being silent and interior. He pulled back his foot. And then he found himself floating up through the spheres of illusion: the living gate with his naked body suspended underneath, watching the arm of the mind flayer suddenly retract and disappear, and the gate pucker closed. At that moment, as if the source of contagion was necessary for its life, the beholder shut its awful eye. And again at that same moment, Haggar found himself lying on his side among the mucus-covered rocks, his fur matted and greasy, his body aching and hurt. He licked at the air, and then after a long minute he stumbled to his four feet, and climbed and scratched his way out of the tunnel, to where Astriana sat among the stones, her armor coated with a glowing slime, her mace broken, her scimitar in her hand. Haggar crawled past Garm, the firbolg soldier, floating on his back, his face contorted in the rictus of death.

And then Astriana put her hand out and Haggar crawled under it, and allowed her to rub the soft fur of his forehead and around his ears. His tongue lolled out, and he licked her hands. She bent down over him to put his face against her face, while he—not because he thought it was a good strategy, but out of simple exhaustion—allowed himself to find his natural shape again. His heavy head fell into her lap. She took her fingers from his hair, rolled him aside, and stood up hurriedly.

But later, after they had climbed back to the surface again, and after they had mounted the cage to the tower's roof, and after he had washed himself in the sumptuous quarters she'd assigned to him, he stood in front of the window, looking up at the sun as it rose above the rim of the great well. He didn't hear the door open, but he turned when she spoke. She wore a gown of green silk, open at the neck and throat, and her hair was loose around her head. "You know we are bound by our promises," she said.

"Then promise me. I want you to take me home."

Her head had fallen forward to accept his punishment. Now she raised her face to look at him. Her nose was crooked, and a scar ran down her cheek over her lips. "I promise," she said.

"And this will be my promise," he continued. "On the night of the full moon, I will wait for you, when the light strikes the surface of the water."

With his back to the window he couldn't tell for sure, but he thought he saw a blush pass over her cheek.

by Bill Slavicsek

AMPERSAND

The Triumphant Return of Gamma World and Other News

Hi. I'm Bill Slavicsek, R&D Director for the Dungeons & Dragons brand. That means that all of the creative work behind D&D game products and novels is ultimately my responsibility. All of the game designers, developers, and editors working on our roleplaying games, boardgames, novels, and digital magazines work for me. I'm also a writer, editor, and game designer. Some of my recent work includes *The Mark of Nerath* novel, the *Castle Ravenloft* boardgame, and the *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* player book for the Dungeons & Dragons Essentials line of products. All of this puts me in a unique position to provide all kinds of sneak peeks and inside secrets behind all Dungeons & Dragons products. And that's just what I do every month in this column.

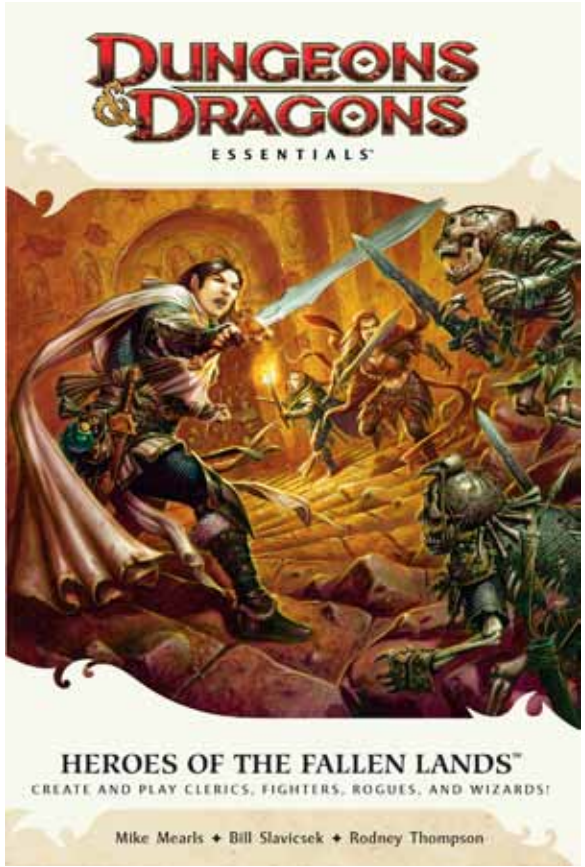
This Month's Releases

If you're a fan of the Dungeons & Dragons roleplaying game, there are quite a few new items to check out this month. Here's a quick run-down of the highlights.

For new players, as well as for long-time players with a fondness for nostalgia, we have a brand-new Dungeons & Dragons *Fantasy Roleplaying Game Starter Set*–also known as "The Red Box." The Red Box appears just like the original version from the early 1980s, complete with cover art by the great Larry Elmore. Inside the Red Box, you'll find everything you need to start playing the D&D game right now, including a solo adventure that guides you through the steps of character creation, a full-length adventure for a group of heroes, monster tokens, a poster map, and game dice. Check out this link to a previous column about the Red Box.

The Red Box kicks off the new line of Essentials products for D&D–a series that will eventually include 10 fundamental titles for all D&D players. The next in the line is *Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, a player book presented in a new digest-sized paperback format that features new versions of the classic character classes: cleric, fighter, rogue, and wizard. These new builds are great for new players while also providing new options for players who have created characters from other D&D sources. Check here for more information about Heroes of the Fallen Lands.

The *Rules Compendium* presents all of the rules of the game in a single volume, and it is also presented in the new digest-sized form. It's a portable source for adjudicating the rules of the game. Check out this link for a preview of the Rules Compendium.


DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
ESSENTIALS
HEROES OF THE FALLEN LANDS™
CREATE AND PLAY CLERICS, FIGHTERS, ROGUES, AND WIZARDS!
Mike Mearls ✦ Bill Slavicsek ✦ Rodney Thompson

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Two other Essentials products release this month. There's the *Dungeon Tiles Master Set: The Dungeon*, a boxed set filled with 10 sheets of Dungeon Tiles that can be used to construct encounters in the most iconic of D&D settings. And for those of you who need game dice, check out the Dungeons & Dragons Roleplaying Game Dice set.

The new set of D&D Miniatures, *Lords of Madness*, debuts this month. Each booster pack includes one Huge figure. This might be the best set of miniatures we've ever produced, with such stand-out sculpts as the Fettered Dracolich, the Cloaker Ambusher, the Iron Golem Juggernaut, the Crownwing, and the Elder Copper Dragon. Check out some preview images from this set here.

And for those of you who like a good story, watch for Bruce Cordell's *Key of Stars*, a new novel set in the Forgotten Realms. For younger readers (or anyone who likes a cool book), check out the *Young Wizard's Handbook: How to Trap a Zombie, Track a Vampire, and Other Hand-On Activities for Monster Hunters*. This jam-packed volume includes such useful information as how to put together a monster-hunting pack, how to make a scroll case, and how to catch a werewolf. I wish I had access to this book when I first started hunting monsters!

D&D On the Road

We were at the PAX show here in Seattle last weekend, running games, talking to fans, and having a great time. The highlight for us was our special area outside the convention center, where we did a little outdoor fair complete with a decorated tour bus, a life-size beholder, and a stage where we hosted contests including an ongoing D&D Spelling Bee. Could you have spelled Lolth? Drizzt? Tamoachan? There was also the continuing saga of Acquisitions, Inc. This amazing session was recorded and we'll post it soon in case you weren't at the live event.

D&D Celebrity Game Event

At Gen Con this year, R.A. Salvatore, Ed Greenwood, and Larry Elmore participated in a live game event run by DM-to-the-Stars Chris Perkins. Follow this link to see how the adventure turned out.

Game Day This Weekend

Get to your local game store to participate in D&D Game Day on September 11. This special event celebrates the release of the new D&D Essentials products, including the "Red Box" Dungeons & Dragons Fantasy Roleplaying Game. You need to be at this event. I kid you not.

D&D Encounters

The new season of the awesome D&D Encounters program kicks off at your local game store on September 22. This time out, we're presenting a retro adventure that harkens back to the very beginnings of the D&D game. *Keep on the Borderlands* features dungeons and dangers on the edge of the civilized parts of the Nentir Vale and uses elements from the new D&D Essentials products. You're going to want a copy of *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* for this season—you're going to need every advantage you can get to survive the terrors assaulting the Keep!

Gamma World Returns!

Coming next month, the return of the *D&D Gamma World Roleplaying Game*! The new boxed set features all of the exhilarating energy of a post-apocalyptic world and all the craziness of mutations gone wild. The playtests have been a hit inside the halls of

Wizards and at conventions this summer, and now you can get a copy of the game and try it for yourself. The game utilizes a version of the rules from the Dungeons & Dragons game but adds a fun twist with mutations and tech cards. You literally mutate as the adventure progresses!

Here's a preview of some of what you'll find in the boxed set. First, from the player's section ...

CHARACTER ORIGIN TABLE

Roll	Origin	Roll	Origin
1	Android	11	Mind Breaker
2	Cockroach	12	Mind Coercer
3	Doppelganger	13	Plant
4	Electrokinetic	14	Pyrokinetic
5	Empath	15	Radioactive
6	Felinoid	16	Rat Swarm
7	Giant	17	Seismic
8	Gravity Controller	18	Speedster
9	Hawkoid	19	Telekinetic
10	Hypercognitive	20	Yeti

USING CHARACTER ORIGINS

Character origins provide traits, powers, and basic character appearance.

Traits: Mutant type identifies the primary ability score for the origin and the origin's power source.

You gain a +2 bonus to overcharge rolls on Alpha powers that have the same power source as your primary origin. Each origin also shows the abilities you gain that are specific to your origin. You gain the traits from both of your origins. If two traits can't be reconciled, you get only the trait of your primary origin.

Critical: Your origin also determines the special effect or bonus damage you gain when you score a critical hit. When you reach 2nd level, you get the critical benefit of one of your origins (your choice). At 6th level, you gain the critical benefit of your other origin, and both benefits apply when you score a critical hit.

Powers: You gain the powers of both origins as indicated on the Character Advancement table. At 1st level, you have the novice power for each of your origins.

Appearance: Your basic species and body form is determined or influenced by your origins. Your character "race" falls into one of five broad categories.

Rat Swarm

You're a consciousness distributed across a swarm of squeaking vermin.

The actual nature of your swarm is based on your other origin. For instance, if your other origin is cockroach, hawkoid, or android, you might be a swarm of roaches, a swarm of bats, or a swarm of tiny, whirring robotic toys.

Appearance: Your body is composed of hundreds of small beings that swarm in a single square, though you usually cluster into a shape suitable for wearing clothing and wielding equipment and weapons using your many tiny hands.

Rat Swarm Traits

Mutant Type: Dexterity; Bio; +2 to bio overcharge.
Skill Bonus (Level 1): Gain a +4 bonus to Stealth checks.
Swarm Defense (Level 1): Gain resist 5 to all damage against melee and ranged attacks, and vulnerable 5 to damage from area and close attacks.
Crawling Mass (Level 1): You can't be knocked prone.
Rat Swarm Critical (Level 2 or 6): When you score a critical hit, the attack deals 1d10 extra damage, and the target takes a -2 penalty to attack rolls until the end of your next turn.

Rat Swarm Powers

Swarm! Rat Swarm Novice

You swarm across your foe , biting it dozens of times as you tangle its limbs.

Encounter ☮ Bio, Physical
Standard Action **Melee** 1
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity + your level vs. Reflex
Hit: 1d8 + Dexterity modifier + twice your level physical damage, and the target is immobilized until the end of your next turn.

Cover More Ground Rat Swarm Utility

You disperse across the ground and quickly reform in a tactically advantageous spot.

Encounter ☮ Bio
Move Action **Personal**
Effect: You shift a number of squares equal to your Dexterity modifier.

Death by a Thousand Bites Rat Swarm Expert

You swarm around your foe, delivering a multitude of tiny bites that all result in bleeding wounds.

Encounter ☮ Bio, Physical
Standard Action **Melee** 1
Target: One creature
Attack: Dexterity + your level vs. Fortitude
Hit: 2d10 + your Dexterity modifier physical damage.
Effect: At the start of your next turn, the target takes physical damage equal to three times your level.

And then, here's a sample opponent from the Game Master's section and examples of the cards ...

Blaash (Gamma Moth)

Bright lights attract gamma moths, so put out those fires when camping near old missile craters and ruined nuclear reactors.

Fearless and carnivorous, these enormous mutated gypsy moths bring down prey with radiation, then hover over the corpses to feed. Black blaashes target victims with precise beams of radiation.

Black Blaash	**Level 3 Artillery**
Small terrestrial beast (insect)	**XP 150**
HP 40; **Bloodied** 20	**Initiative** +5
AC 17, **Fortitude** 16, **Reflex** 17, **Will** 14	**Perception** +1
Speed fly 6 (hover)	Tremorsense 5
Immune radiation; **Vulnerable** 5 poison	
Traits	
☼ **Radioactive Flux** (radiation) ✇ **Aura** 1	
Any creature within the aura experiences an Alpha flux on a d20 roll of 4 or lower.	
Standard Actions	
⊕ **Wing Sweep** (radiation) ✇ **At-Will**	
Attack: Melee 1 (one creature); +6 vs. Reflex	
Hit: 1d6 + 6 radiation damage.	
⚚ **Radiation Beam** (radiation) ✇ **At-Will**	
Attack: Ranged 10 (one creature); +8 vs. Fortitude	
Hit: 2d6 + 5 radiation damage, and the target is weakened (save ends). Each creature adjacent to the target takes 5 radiation damage.	
Triggered Actions	
⚚ **Radioactive Pulse** (radiation) ✇ **Encounter**	
Trigger: The blaash drops to 0 hit points.	
Attack (No Action): Close burst 3 (enemies in burst); +6 vs. Fortitude	
Hit: 2d6 + 3 radiation damage.	
Str 12 (+2) **Dex** 18 (+5) **Wis** 11 (+1)	
Con 16 (+4) **Int** 5 (-2) **Cha** 8 (+0)	

ALPHA
PSI, PSYCHIC
PSYCHIC REVERSAL
"I'm rubber, you're glue."
IMMEDIATE INTERRUPT
PERSONAL
TRIGGER: You take psychic damage from an enemy's attack
EFFECT: The triggering enemy takes that psychic damage instead. You still suffer any other effects from the triggering attack.
OVERCHARGE: When you use this power, you can roll a d20.
10+: The triggering enemy is also stunned until the end of your next turn.
9 OR LESS: You take one-half the psychic damage instead, and the triggering enemy takes the rest.

OMEGA
AREA 52
HEADMOUNTED LASER
This helmet comes complete with a partially sentient, self-swiveling laser mount . . . and side mirrors!
HEAD
POWER: Encounter ✧ Laser
STANDARD ACTION
RANGED 10
PRIMARY TARGET: One creature
PRIMARY ATTACK: Level + 6 vs. Reflex
HIT: 3d8 + Dexterity modifier + twice your level laser damage.
MISS: Make the following secondary attack.
SECONDARY TARGET: Each creature within 2 squares of you
SECONDARY ATTACK: Level + 6 vs. Reflex
HIT: 1d10 + twice your level laser damage.

ALPHA
DARK
ANTI-LIFE LEECH
Nobody better life leech you, or they'll be sorry.
BENEFIT: You gain resist 10 necrotic. In addition, you are immune to life leech attacks. When a creature targets you with life leech, it is stunned until the end of its next turn, and its hit point total drops to its bloodied value (or to 1 hit point if it is already bloodied).
OVERCHARGE: None.

ALPHA
BIO
AQUATIC ADAPTATION
All that time you spent in the tub as a youngster is finally paying off!
BENEFIT: You can breathe water, and you gain a Swim speed equal to your speed.
OVERCHARGE: At any time, you can roll a d20.
10+: While this card is readied, you can mentally communicate with fish within 1 mile of you.
9 OR LESS: While this card is readied, you think you can mentally communicate with fish within 1 mile of you.

Skill DC's

BY STEPHEN SCHUBERT

ILLUSTRATION BY JIM NELSON

We continually evaluate the tools we've put into the game. As we design and develop rules and mechanics, we base some of the work on underlying assumptions regarding how we expect players to advance and improve their characters through their choices of mechanical elements such as feats and items. A short time ago, we evaluated the DCs for the skills subsystem and made some adjustments to the rate at which DCs scale with level. These tables appear on page 126 of the *Rules Compendium* as well as on the DM Screen available in the DM Kit.

If you compare the new values to the DCs from the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and DMG 2, you'll notice that the DCs are higher across the board. You'll also notice that Hard DC entries scale faster than Easy and Moderate DCs by level. Finally, the new skill DC table has an entry for each level instead of grouping levels into bands of three. These changes are far from arbitrary, as you'll see.

Early on, we divided checks into Hard, Medium, and Easy, but we didn't do a good job of telling DMs which one to use in a situation. We needed a system that would not only guide the DM on when to use a particular check but also describe the sorts of characters that would be attempting these checks.

The first step when evaluating the DCs was to determine what those DC categories truly represent. Then we describe our archetypical character who fits that category and determine the typical skill bonus that character might have. Finally, we set DCs based on a curve of expected values that would provide a reasonable challenge at each level—we define reasonable challenge as a d20 roll that is successful around 65% of the time (you need to roll 8+ on the die).

Easy: The action involved isn't trivial but is still pretty simple. These are the simplest checks and should represent a reasonable challenge for characters that have no training in the skill (an untrained character). An untrained character is typically adding half his level to the skill and probably doesn't have an ability score that helps him out. He might get another +1 by Epic tier, since all his ability modifiers have increased by 21st level. Trained characters have little risk of failure, and expert characters are nearly guaranteed success. These are the DCs that we suggest DMs should use when every

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character in the party is expected to make the check or for group checks (where half the PCs must succeed on the roll to earn a success for the group).

Moderate: A moderate check requires a bit of training or innate ability, or a bit of luck. These checks are aimed at skilled characters who have training in the skill, though there are other options for getting a similar skill modifier, such as having a high ability score (18+) in the skill's key ability or combining a racial bonus and a moderate (14+) ability score. These DCs scale a little faster than easy DCs, which accounts for ability score increases or adding a feat or path feature if the key ability isn't your primary or secondary class stat. These DCs are the standard difficulty for a skill check in a skill challenge.

Hard: These checks are designed to test characters who are even more focused on the particular skill, though there might still be some chance of failure even for these expert characters. Without additional assistance (such as a power bonus or another character's aid), the expert PC will succeed against these DCs around two out of three times. The expert PC typically has training in the skill, and his or her primary ability score is the skill's key ability (or secondary ability score along with a skill focus feat or racial bonus). As the character increases in level, we expect feat and item selection to provide an extra boost along the way, as well as ability score increases. This DC is a good choice to really challenge a focused PC, though it's also a good DC to use for repeated successes with a single skill in a skill challenge (once the first, moderate attempt is successful).

DIFFICULTY CLASS BY LEVEL

Level	Easy	Moderate	Hard
1	8	12	19
2	9	13	20
3	9	13	21
4	10	14	21
5	10	15	22
6	11	15	23
7	11	16	23
8	12	16	24
9	12	17	25
10	13	18	26
11	13	19	27
12	14	20	28
13	14	20	29
14	15	21	29
15	15	22	30
16	16	22	31
17	16	23	31
18	17	23	32
19	17	24	33
20	18	25	34
21	19	26	35
22	20	27	36
23	20	27	37
24	21	28	37
25	21	29	38
26	22	29	39
27	22	30	39
28	23	30	40
29	23	31	41
30	24	32	42

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All-In: As we identified these character archetypes, we also noted a fourth sort of PC—the "all-in" character. This guy takes every possible advantage toward maximizing a particular skill. He has feats, a racial bonus, starts with a 20 in the primary modifier, is trained in the skill, and searches out magic items that further advance his skill. Even with our now-higher Hard DC scale, this character is nearly guaranteed success. But it's also difficult to get bonuses that high for more than one or two skills. Rather than push the Hard DCs out of reach of typical characters, we recognize that those characters exist and will be really good at their chosen vocation. If the DM is doing his job (and we've given even more tools to help with that), then that character will have his moments to shine but will also face many challenges that can't be tackled with his maxed-out skill.

These new DCs form the backbone for our skill challenges and for other skill-related rolls throughout the game. For example, escape DCs for monsters or traps can be set based on the sorts of characters we expect should have a chance.

We hope this sheds some light on the method behind our madness. Be sure to check out *Rules Compendium* for an in-depth look at setting up skill checks and challenges in your game!

About the Author

Stephen Schubert is a game developer for Wizards of the Coast, and is the Development Manager for RPGs and the Dungeons & Dragons® game. He has provided development and design work for many 4th Edition D&D products, including the *Monster Manual* and *Player's Handbook* series, and the upcoming release of *Gamma World*.

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Apocalypse Now!

BY SHELLY MAZZANOBLE
illustrations by William O'Conner

I've been waiting a long time for Gamma World. Five years to be exact. Not as long as some of you, sure, but when I get excited about something, I anticipate it in dog years.

It was sometime in late September when our department began deliberations about what our Halloween 2005 theme should be. You need to understand just how important Halloween is to Wizards of the Coast. It's like the Super Bowl to football fans, solstice to the druids, white russians to Lebowski Fest. It's *big business* around here.

Every year, the departments compete against one another for best decorations. I'm sure there's a prize but I have no idea what it, is because my department never wins. We never even place. (This may have something to do with the fact we don't start thinking about a theme until well after Labor Day.) In fact, some years we never decide on a theme and everyone shows up doing their own thing. Your "rejected superheroes" theme loses its impact when two of your team members are dressed as Laverne and Shirley.

Not to be a poor sport, but Halloween isn't really a fair competition here. One department in particular always upsets the candied apple cart. That would be the Creative Team. Yeah, I know, the name says it all. These are the clever, artistic designers who not only create packaging, products, and all around pretty pictures, they make their own clothes, Christmas cards, and centerpieces just for fun.

"Oh look! It's Elminster made out of cherry Lifesavers and empty toner cartridges. What a fun way to spend your lunch break."

One year, the Creative Team dressed as freak show carnies. They had a cotton candy machine, people! Who can compete with that? Another year, they were dead celebrities—dressed how they died. Again, I ask—how do we compete with that? Seriously. Email me your suggestions.

That summer in 2005, we thought we knew exactly how to take down those Martha Stewart disciples: we would reach into the D&D wayback machine and turn our little corner of WotC into a post-apocalyptic warzone wonderland. With the help of Goodwill and some old fashioned dumpster diving, we decked—or rather, trashed—our desks, offices, and conference rooms. My coworkers and I glued googly eyes to our plants, animal tails to our jeans, and, in the case of our then-pregnant director, a giant baby doll head to her protruding belly. Seriously creepy.

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With an industrial fan creating an eerie whoosh of white noise and blowing dead leaves and debris into the Finance department's version of Candy Land, we huffed stale air in our gas masks and waited for the judging committee to come by.

There was no way we couldn't win this. I had a raccoon face painted on me! With *non-hypoallergenic* theater make-up. I was *that* dedicated to the cause.

(We came in third. Robbed!)

That whole day, I kept thinking, *wow, this Gamma World is one freaky land. I wish we would re-release an updated version of the game sometime in the Fall of 2010.* I might be paraphrasing, but they're my thoughts so it's OK.

Imagine my delight a year ago at finding out my paraphrased thoughts would come true. *Gamma World* was making a repeat performance! Good thing I still had my raccoon tail pinned to my bulletin board.

I finally got my chance to play last month when Bart agreed to run us through a quick encounter. Five of us went into a conference room as brand managers, editors, and product specialists, but we came out as rat swarms, pyrokinetics, even a yeti (until she had to leave for a meeting).

"What in heck is going on here," Hilary, who was busy rolling up a radioactive cockroach named Sassafrass asked. "I mean seriously? This is what I'm playing?"

We had spent nearly an hour of our two-hour time block laughing at the random combinations people were coming up with. I particularly love the character-building part of *Gamma World*. Sentient plants? Anthropomorphism? Androids? What's not to love?

Instead of picking race and class, you get two origins that combine to define your character. Origins are randomly selected by a diee roll and a table from the rulebook. Now, you may get something general like "giant" as I did, but feel free to think outside the beanstalk. A giant can be . . . well, anything.

"You could be a giant fish," Bart said. "Or a Q-tip. Think of something and then make it gigantic."

I decided to be a giant teddy bear, which sounded sweet and comforting . . . but just wait.

"I shall name him Pinky Jones."

My second origin was "mind breaker."

"What's a mindbreaker?" I asked.

"It means you can pretty much make your opponent's head explode just by thinking about it," Bart explained.

See? Not so sweet and cuddly anymore.

"And you're ginormous thanks to both of your origins," Chris Youngs noted. "Just like in real life."

"Har, har." That's so not true. Everyone knows I have a freakishly small head. I wouldn't mind a little of Pinky's fluff. Maybe then I could wear headbands.

Remember how I said we decorated our department by pulling trash out of dumpsters? Well, that's not far from how our characters got their equipment. More dice rolls granted my fellow party members gear like generators and fuel, electric blankets, and wristwatches. Pinky got a heavy flashlight and a saxophone.

"Okay, sure," I said. Tabitha might not be able to work that into her arsenal, but Pinky can make that work. Can't you just picture him squeezing the stuffing out of his enemies and then unwinding with a little "Careless Whisper" on his sax? Hey! It's supposed to be bizarre and unsettling!

Because Pinky is a giant, he can obviously handle a huge weapon. No dagger or sling shot here.

"Pinky would like a parking meter," I said. "Or maybe some building scaffolding?"

"Cannon balls?" Laura suggested.

Hilary proposed an aquarium filled with bricks.

"Are we talking ranged or melee?" Chris, ever pragmatic, wanted to know.

"Does that matter?" I asked. "I mean, I'm seriously considering writing Oscar Meyer Wienermobile on my character sheet."

"It matters," Bart said. "Pinky can have one of each."

I kept the Wienermobile for my ranged weapon (he could toss it at someone and retrieve it later, I supposed) and, considering he was a teddy bear and all, I figure he'd probably be comfortable toting around a pillowcase.

"Filled with buckwheat," I explain. "And it's a really big pillowcase."

It's hard not to be inspired when the world is your oyster, even if your world is filled with chaos and radiation. The rules say heavy melee. The rest is up to you.

"Newton would like a 2-by-4 for his melee weapon," Chris said. "With nails in it. Big, rusty nails."

"Oooh . . . tetanus! Scary!" Hilary said.

"That's so ghetto," I told him. "I be looking for Newton spread eagle on the hood of a cop car tonight."

Just when we thought we couldn't add any more layers of absurdity to our characters, Bart doled out seven Alpha and Omega cards for each of us. Alpha cards are your mutations and Omega cards are technology-based 'treasure'. You find random items in this game all the time. The Alpha cards offer you the ability to overcharge, meaning if you roll over a ten, something good happens. If you roll under, something bad happens. Usually to you.

"Just like Pandora's box on *Big Brother*," I mused.

"Just like Pandora's box in real life," Chris countered.

(I won't bore you with the details of our twenty-minute debate about *Big Brother* being real life. Duh, Chris. It's called *reality* television.)

When we finally got to the meat of the encounter, we discovered it wa pork. As in pigs.

"Pigs in Space!" we shouted.

"No," Bart said. "It's pigs in leather."

Good, because I couldn't imagine hitting Miss Piggy upside the head with my seed-stuffed pillowcase.

"Oh, and they have friends." Bart placed three badders on the playmat. Badders are just what you might assume—mutated, evil badgers.

The badders and the porkers (seriously?) had attacked a convoy and were busy looting the overturned vehicle.

"You suspect the truck is filled, or at least was filled, with loot," Bart told us.

"Cookies?" Chris asked. Apparently Newton was obsessed with cookies. Likely the result of a mutation.

On Pinky's turn, he used *brickbat*, one of his giant novice powers. It's a close burst. He spun around in a circle with his pillowcase and socked a badder, knocking it prone.

"Nice one, Pinky!" Laura said. Her robotic rat swarm, Nibbles, did a number on one of the porkers. Is it too soon to say we're good at Gamma World? Because I thought we were kicking pork butt.

Like crows, those badders held grudges and didn't take it well when you hurt one of their own. One of them shot Pinky with a rifle and dealt a whooping twelve points of damage. I only had six left.

"Whoa!" I shouted. "A badger can deal that kind of damage? It's a small, burrowing mammal. I'm a giant!"

"It's a badder," Chris said. "That's much different from a badger."

"Or maybe they mean badger, as in a person from Wisconsin," Hilary said. "Those long winters can get to you."

Whatever it was, it didn't back down and neither did those porkers. Hilary used her cockroach novice power, *eau du roach*, and barfed an acid marinade on one and knocked it back a square. It was a solid move, but poor Hilary looked mortified. I've never even heard her sneeze.

Mortification paid off, because Hilary killed the porker and got to loot his possessions. In this case, it was a dog.

"I'll take it," she casually said.

Pinky was pissed. He wanted a dog!

Rather than psychically assault Sassafrass, Pinky funneled his anger into the remaining porker and hurled it into a pond of green ooze. He sank like a . . . . well, like an acid-blasted, mutated pig in leather.

"I hope he didn't have anything of value in that leather suit," Chris said.

"You want to go after him and check?" I answered, flexing my biceps. Or rather Pinky's. Or . . . what?

The encounter lasted longer than our allocated time, but nobody cared, so we continued. We eventually killed the badders and the porkers and got some good loot in the process. (Pinky now has a healing potion and a grenade, both of which he'd trade for a dog.)

I swiped Bart's rulebook and brought it home. That night I created a few more characters. Then a few more in the morning. Then a handful at work the next day. A telekinetic plant. A yeti speedster. A felinoid hawkoid. I can't stop creating characters! I feel like those batty parents on television with nineteen kids. Maybe someone will give me and my mutant brood a reality TV show.

As I got up from my desk, I heard Laura yelp.

"Oh my god, Shelly!" she screamed. "Is that a raccoon tail on your pants?"

Oh dear. Looks like I need to get back to Gamma Terra immediately.

About the Author

Shelly Mazzanoble dressed up as a mutant raccoon for Halloween 2005. A few hours later in kickboxing class, Bart Carroll kicked her so hard in the face that he wiped her raccoon nose right off.

Unearthed Arcana

by Bart Carroll

When it came to deciding topics, we've had a fortuitous conflux this month. In his editorial, Steve Winter announced the return of *Unearthed Arcana*; for those not familiar, *Unearthed Arcana* was the 1985 AD&D® supplement whose purpose (according to Gary Gygax in the foreword) was to bring new dimensions to the game. Added material included new spells, magic items, and gear; new, formerly monstrous subraces to play: the gray dwarf (duergar), dark elf (drow), and deep gnome (svirfneblin); and new classes: the barbarian, thief-acrobat, and cavalier (all three of which, not coincidentally, were featured in the Saturday morning Dungeons & Dragons® cartoon).

Today, *Unearthed Arcana* would in all likelihood have been called *Player's Handbook 2*. Yet much of its material came from *Dragon* magazine, and for whatever reason, this material retained an aura of "optional" for many gamers. As Steve wrote, the return of *Unearthed Arcana* to the magazine means a return of optional rules to include in your game . . . if you wish.

Added to that, this month also sees the release of *Player Essentials: Heroes of the Fallen Lands*, which brings new builds for core classes to the game. Among them is the knight build for the fighter.

In this installment of D&D Alumni, we wanted to look back at the history of the knight in the game, including its closest precursors: the paladin and cavalier.

The First Knight (Minus Richard Gere)

In the original *Men & Magic* supplement for the game, classes were limited to fighting-men, magic-users, and clerics—generic terms and without embellishing descriptions except for their mechanics. Fighting-men could rise to the level of "lord" and build castles, and with the game rules themselves formulated by Gygax's Castle and Crusade Society (along with Rob

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Kuntz and Dave Arneson), they had all the trappings of the medieval knight, without ever calling it such.

For a game with its roots in historical miniature warfare, as well as for its fantasy tropes, the term "knight" should have made perfect sense. Then again, the designers also wanted sword-and-sorcery elements, so with three main classes to start, "knight" might have been too specific of a choice of medieval terminology for general use (although, it must be noted, knighthood did exist in Gygax's Greyhawk campaign). "Fighting-man" it would have to be.

With the 1st Edition *Player's Handbook*, the fighting-man (now just "fighter") remained fairly generic, more so than any other class; if the game's influences included medieval men-at-arms as well as pulp fantasy adventurers, a fighter could be styled easily by his or her player as either.

A fighter/cleric hybrid, the 1st Edition paladin conveyed far more specific flavor in its description and abilities. Although closer to a true knight, the paladin went a step further, becoming something of a mystical, holy warrior (as much Jedi knight as knight). Special to the paladins were their powerful defenses, holy swords, and warhorses—not to mention their code of conduct, including a pseudo-vow of poverty . . . if being limited to ten magic items and retaining enough wealth to construct a small castle could be considered frugal. "Law and good deeds are the meat and drink of paladins," the *Player's Handbook* said, leading to the famous conundrum for the class (and odd calls to Customer Service): If the paladin knowingly committed an evil act, the paladin lost all benefits forever.

But more on that later.

IN RIDES THE CAVALIER

An even closer approximation to a historical knight came with the cavalier. Originally introduced by Gygax in *Dragon* #72 (April 1983), the cavalier reappeared in *Unearthed Arcana* where it took its noble place, not as subclass of fighter, but as its own class (with the paladin now subclass to the cavalier). The magazine description went so far as to state ". . . the cavalier class . . . is predicated upon knighthood and chivalry."

Compared to the mere fighter, the cavalier class was superior. Vastly superior. Cavaliers enjoyed combat bonuses with their preferred weapons, accelerated advancement in attacks/round, and immunity to fear plus high defenses against other mental attacks. They remained conscious at negative hit points. They could parry in lieu of attacking (subtracting their bonuses to hit against the attacker's roll) with their weapon and/or shield. The cavalier simply fought better than the fighter; the fighter was merely the basic foundation.

In keeping with the optional or experimental feel of *Unearthed Arcana*, the cavaliers also featured new class concepts. Certain cavaliers (of lower rank) started at level 0 and worked their way up to 1st (which made an excellent story hook for hirelings in the party). Each level, cavaliers also naturally progressed in Strength, Dexterity, and Constitution—allowing them to reach the vaunted pinnacle of "18" in those scores, even if otherwise prohibited by racial limitations . . . or by being a woman. Yes, back in 1st Edition, female characters had ceilings to their Strength scores.

And in keeping with the flavor of medieval knights, the cavalier excelled at horsemanship and eschewed lesser protection (regardless of any magic bonuses) in their quest for the best armor: the new "superweapons" known as field and full plate. "Leather, studded leather, and padded armor are the dress of thieves and peasants," the cavalier felt, his nose in the air, "and as such are beneath the cavalier's station, such that the cavalier will not wear these armor types."

THE DIFFICULTIES OF BEING A CHAMPION OF VIRTUE

"In my time as a DM," Roger E. Moore wrote in *Dragon* #51 ("It's Not Easy Being Good"), "I've removed three or four Paladinhoods, encouraged two to retirement, and even removed one Anti-Paladin from his status for committing a good act."

If a balancing of the paladins' and cavaliers' superior fighting skills was meant to be (aside from the experience points required for them to gain levels, back in the days when different classes advanced at different rates), it came in their strict, proto-chivalric codes of conduct. "There is a custom-made T-shirt in my closet that depicts a Red Dragon, clutching a full stomach and in some distress, with the caption 'Paladins Cause Heartburn,'" Roger wrote. "This phrase has more meaning for me as a Dungeon Master and as a player in AD&D games than just as a sight gag. In my three years of gaming, it has been a rare thing to see a properly characterized Paladin, or even one that's done at least reasonably right most of the time. Unlike other character classes in AD&D games, the restrictions on the Paladin class give it a wealth of special problems in play."

Later in the issue (which also interpreted a paladin's immunity to disease as proof against green slime—something I'd never considered), Robert J. Bezold contributed a model code of conduct, based on 11th century medieval crusaders. It went like this:

1. Thou shalt believe all that the Church teaches and shalt obey all her commandments.
2. Thou shalt defend the Church.
3. Thou shalt respect all weaknesses and shalt constitute thyself the defender of them.
4. Thou shalt love the country in which thou wast born.
5. Thou shalt not recoil before thine enemy.
6. Thou shalt make war against the infidel without cessation and without mercy.
7. Thou shalt perform scrupulously thy feudal duties, if they be not contrary to the laws of God.
8. Thou shalt never lie, and shalt remain faithful to thy pledged word.
9. Thou shalt be generous and give largesse to everyone.
10. Thou shalt be everywhere and always the champion of the Right and the Good against Injustice and Evil.

Reimagined for the magazine's cavalier, the code of chivalry could be summed up as follows:

1. Noble service willingly rendered.
2. Defense of any charge unto death.
3. Courage and enterprise in obedience to rule.
4. Respect for all peers.
5. Honor to all above your station.
6. Military prowess exercised in service to your lord.
7. Courtesy to all ladies.
8. War is the flowering of chivalry.
9. Battle is the test of manhood.
10. Combat is glory.
11. Personal glory above all in battle.
12. Obedience and respect from all beneath your station.
13. Scorn for those who are lowly and ignoble.
14. Death to all who oppose the cause.
15. Death before dishonor.

Expanded in *Unearthed Arcana*, as a result of the code and desire for battle, cavaliers cannot be controlled in battle situations (don't even try to control them!). They would charge any enemy in sight, with the following order of preference:

1. Powerful monsters (dragons, demons, giants, etc.) serving enemy leaders, then the leaders themselves
2. Opponent cavaliers of great renown, enemy flags and standards
3. Opponent cavalry of noble or elite status
4. Other opponent cavalry
5. Opponent elite footmen
6. Opponent camp and headquarters
7. Opponent melee troops
8. Levies or peasants

To editorialize briefly, fundamental challenges existed while playing a paladin or cavalier. For starters, a class that can be demoted or fired for not following a subjective code of conduct causes obvious tension between a player and his or her DM. That said, the player and DM can meet this challenge.

However, the benefits of a paladin's warhorse and the cavalier's horsemanship have often struck me as more problematic. Dungeons & Dragons, in my experiences, far more often concerns the exploration of, well, dungeons—not to mention temples, towers, ruins, and occasional jaunts around cities. In a game of dungeon exploration, a mounted knight has issues. Is the horse turned away at the entrance, like Bill the Pony outside the Mines of Moria? Is it forced into the dungeon (which calls to mind an old Sage Advice question about how one's centaur character could possibly climb a ladder)? Aside from bragging rights, what good is having a pegasus or griffon if not all the party also has some means to fly (even the DC Super Friends had the same issue)?

For the cavalier, which excels at riding and the lance, this seemingly limits their full use of powers. How often did they have the opportunity to charge across open ground at opponent cavaliers and at enemy camps or headquarters? I'd guess the answer is rarely—unless the DM was catering his or her adventures to the cavalier. (I take similar issue with the 1st Edition assassin's spying abilities, as much as I otherwise love the class; how often could it be used without disenfranchising the rest of the table?)

A powerful but limited role, the cavalier made better sense in a campaign where players kept a stable of characters (or character trees, from our *Dark Sun* Alumni article), then were brought out in their full, shining glory whenever the mission called for their expertise.

But again, that's just me editorializing.

ADDITIONAL EXPRESSIONS

By 2nd Edition, the warrior classes encompassed the fighter (described as an "an expert in weapons and, if he is clever, tactics and strategy," with examples including Hercules, Perseus, Beowulf, and Sinbad) and the paladin ("a noble and heroic warrior, the symbol of all that is right and true in the world," with examples being Roland and Sir Lancelot).

Again, neither was outright described as a knight, and the 2nd Edition cavalier would have to wait until the *Complete Fighter's Handbook* (along with the barbarian, as well as gladiators, pirates, and samurai). Even then, the cavalier was now no longer a class or a subclass, but it was relegated to a kit for ". . . a paladin who wants to look every inch the shining knight." At least the kit started with a free horse; later supplements on the crusades, fortresses, and even Charlemagne would add further material.

With 3rd Edition, the game literally exploded with officially named knights. Starting in the *Player's Handbook*, a fighter came to be described as ". . . the questing knight, the conquering overlord, the king's champion, the elite foot soldier, the hardened mercenary, and the bandit king—all are fighters." The term had at last entered the fighter's description; a knight was a fighter, but not all fighters were knights.

The 3rd Edition *Player's Handbook 2* then brought the official knight class, which could issue a knight's challenge (a precursor to marking). When it came to prestige classes, a good several dozen also had "knight" in the name: platinum knights, Purple Dragon knights, knights of the Silverymoon; not to mention knights of the lily, the rose, the skull, the crown, the chalice . . . the list goes on.

Although the game did not use the term "knight" early on, whether reticence for its historical context or simply because the paladin and cavalier already occupied that role, knights clearly returned later in force. And why not? As questing adventurers, good in purpose, and donned in armor—could there be any better word?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Of course there remain still other expressions of knights in the game we haven't even mentioned, such as *Fiend Folio*'s death knights—and as long as there have been knights, there have also been black knights, blackguards, and anti-paladins to oppose them.

We'll end with one final code of conduct, this one from the *Complete Fighter's Handbook* for the cavalier:

- He must cheerfully perform any noble service or quest asked of him;
- he must defend, to the death, any person or item placed in his charge;
- he must show courage and enterprise when obeying his rulers;
- he must show respect for all peers and equals;
- he must honor all those above his station (his social class): he must demand respect and obedience from those below his station;

- ✦ he must scorn those who are lowly and ignoble (he will not help the ill-mannered, the coarse, the crude; he will not use equipment which is badly-made or inferior; he will fight on foot before riding a nag; etc.);
- ✦ he must perform military service to his lord whenever asked; he must show courtesy to all ladies (if the cavalier is male);
- ✦ he must regard war as the flowering of chivalry, and a noble enterprise;
- ✦ he must regard battle as the test of manhood, and combat as glory;
- ✦ he must achieve personal glory in battle;

- ✦ he must slay all those who oppose his cause;
- ✦ and he must choose death before dishonor.

When I wrote about pirates of the Astral Sea, I wondered about alternative pirate codes. I suppose that in the game's arenas (especially with *Dark Sun* released), a D&D-tailored version of the Marquess of Queensberry rules for boxing and sport might exist. So we've seen various codes of conduct and chivalry throughout the editions, but it strikes me as odd that there should be one assumed code for all "knights" (including paladins and cavaliers) for the entire game world(s).

My challenge to you, the reader, is to come up with alternative codes of conduct for the latest inception of the knight. How might such a code look, depending on the knight's race? His or her alignment? Deity? Campaign world? A combination of these factors?

If you were to play a knight, what code of conduct would you write for your hero to follow?

About the Author

Bart joined Wizards of the Coast in the spring of 2004. Originally producing their licensed property websites (including *Star Wars* and G.I. Joe), he transitioned to the D&D website, where he's remained part of the D&D Insider Team. In this role, he primarily generates website content in support of the 4th Edition line of products, online magazines, and the gamer lifestyle—of which he is an extremely proud adherent.

Summer Shows and Gamma World

BY CHRIS TULACH

Well, the summer went racing by here at Wizards Organized Play. Another excellent convention season for D&D—although that term is starting to lose its meaning, as the big gaming shows are being spread throughout the year more and more. But two big ones—Gen Con Indy and PAX Prime—just concluded in the past month, and I'd like to take a little time this month to give them a proper wrap-up.

On the Wizards Play Network side, we'll talk *Gamma World* Game Day (right around the corner on October 23rd). D&D Encounters: Keep on the Borderlands has just begun, so I'll give that a nod by answering a burning question regarding *Dragon* play content for use in the season.

Gen Con Indy 2010

Gen Con Indy on the first full weekend of August was huge for D&D again this year. We had more players in the Sagamore Ballroom than last year, and for the first time in many, many years, all editions of D&D had a place in one room. The booth, with its live-action play experience was a hit, and nostalgia displays were on hand outside the gaming hall.

Larry Elmore, one of the most iconic D&D artists (and illustrator of the famous "Red Box" cover) was one of our featured guests, and our new version of the "Red Box" was on display for all to see with a giant interactive cover piece. Attendees could don the fighter's regalia, including his sword, shield, and furry horned helmet to fight the red dragon statue leaping out from the box cover!

Inside the Sagamore Ballroom, the gaming hall was filled with players participating in a wide variety of D&D games. On the 4th Edition front, we had a smash hit with *Glory and Blood: Dark Sun Arenas*, a multi-game challenge wherein you'd create a 1st-level *Dark Sun* character and fight your way through the seven arenas of the city-states of Athas. In addition, our D&D Championship event was incredibly well received, earning high praise for both the format and the theme. This year, we presented the first Epic-tier organized play event for the championship, as the players competed as teams to reach 30th level and the final battle against Orcus! Living Forgotten Realms kept almost half the hall filled with gamers, many of which were really digging our return to the Living City in the multi-adventure mini-campaign called *Return to Ravens Bluff*.

We also filled the hall with players of other editions of D&D—DMs who scheduled events at the show were invited to run their games in the hall with the rest of the D&D players. We had everything from "White Box" Original D&D games to 3.5 Edition going on all weekend long in the hall. All D&D players were able to game with us in the Sagamore—an assembly that had not been seen since the days of Gen Con back in Milwaukee years ago. It ran so well that we're definitely looking at doing it again next year. After all, if you're passionate about your favorite version of D&D, you can share that with all the other fans in the same room!

Of course, no talk of Gen Con Indy and D&D would be complete without mention of the runaway hit of the show—*Castle Ravenloft*. The first board game in our line of cooperative games for 1-5 players, hundreds of folks took a spin through the haunted halls and dangerous corridors to get a sneak peek on the game. I was asked countless times where to buy it, and as it didn't release until later in the month, everyone was chomping at the bit to play more. By now, it's on the store shelves, but it's flying off quick, so get yours soon if you haven't yet. [You can pick up additional adventures for it on the Wizards site, too!]

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PAX Prime 2010

At PAX Prime, the new Dungeons & Dragons® *Fantasy Roleplaying Game Starter Set* had been released to our core hobby stores, and we were scant days away from the first full month of the Essentials line hitting those same shops. The nostalgia vibe was in full swing, and as the con swelled to a sold-out attendance again this year, we had droves of players participating in many of the events that we ran at Gen Con Indy a few weeks earlier.

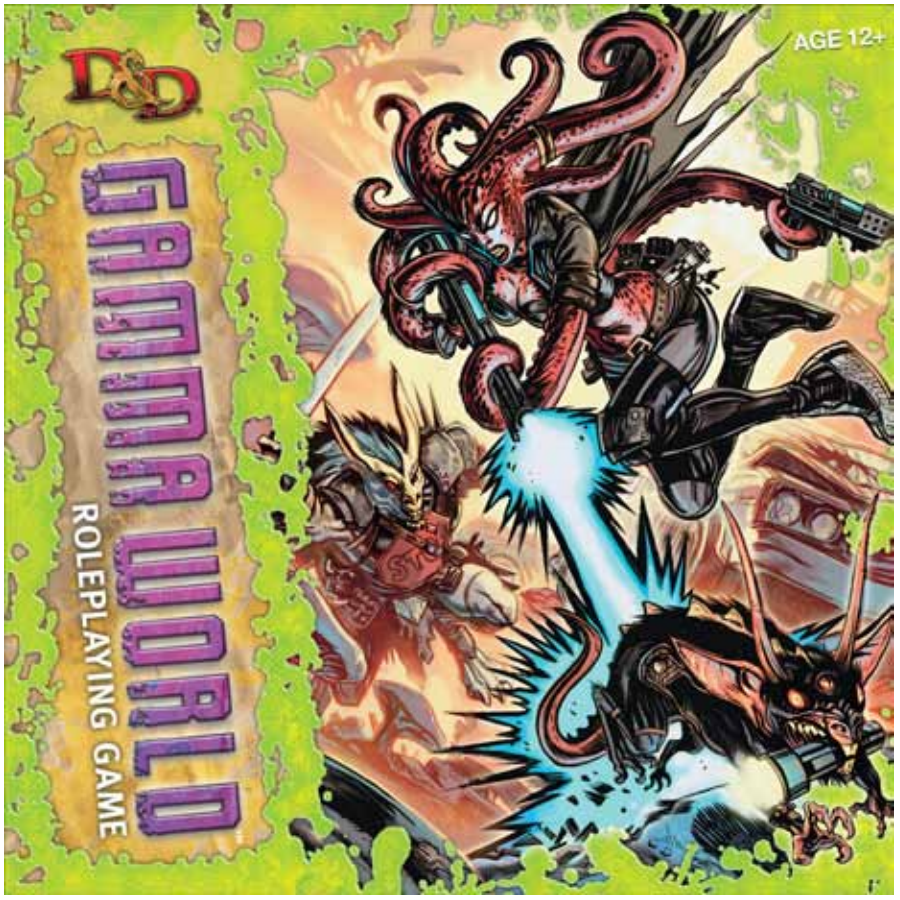
We had a super-cool D&D-wrapped bus parked a couple of blocks away from the show, where we did all kinds of contests and shows all weekend long. Folks could stop by, check out the massive dice, see the well-traveled beholder (he's been around since the 4th Edition launch), and pick up some sweet nostalgia swag, like t-shirts and old-school-color-in-the-numbers dice.

In the convention center, the highlight event was the reunited Acquisitions, Inc. adventuring company, with Chris Perkins at the DM helm and the return of Wil Wheton's character, Aeofel. The hall was jam-packed with anxious attendees, booked to capacity. The game did not disappoint, and I know that I can't wait to see the footage when it goes live on our site!

For gaming, we ran many of the events that were popular from Gen Con, but we also brought out a first look at *Gamma World* with a special adventure entitled "Pax Extraterrestria." Players had a hoot creating their own mutants, playing with the Alpha Mutation and Omega Tech cards, and attempting to squelch the threat of the Returned Earth to the city of "Seat." The adventure should be available later in October as a convention special through the ordering system.

Mutants and Mayhem: D&D Gamma World Game Day!

On October 23, get ready to experience some weird science fantasy in the blasted remains of Gamma Terra! Grab a friend and celebrate the launch of the new *D&D Gamma World Boxed Set*. Mutate a brave new hero and be ready to take on just about anything. Experience the return of an old classic in a new play experience using the D&D 4th Edition rules engine. The *D&D Gamma World* game is a fast, furious romp through a post-apocalyptic Earth where mutant heroes face off against killer robots, alien weirdness, and strange, irradiated creatures. Here's a description of the adventure:



Gamma World Game Day: Trouble in Freesboro
It's shocking how the Big Mistake completely obliterated some places while others got by relatively unscathed. Freesboro falls into the latter camp, but if Genghis Tangh has his way, life will never be the same for the mutants of Gamma Terra. Delve into the origins of the Big Mistake as you take on Tangh and his forces! Pick up a *D&D Gamma World Boxed Set*, a few booster packs of power cards, and create your own characters in an exciting new Game Day experience! A *D&D Gamma World* Game Day adventure designed for 4-6 characters of 1st level.

An exclusive 4-hour adventure called *Trouble in Freesboro*, written by Robert J. Schwalb,

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includes an online feature to the game which, if accessed during play, can provide the players with a valuable clue. Look for more information on this as the event approaches!

If you're playing, you'll pick up two *D&D Gamma World* booster packs and create your own character at the store on the day of the event. DMs need to have a copy of the *D&D Gamma World Boxed Set* and the adventure materials, available prior to the event day in the game day kit, to prepare to run the game. In addition to a poster map and the adventure, the game day kit also contains two different *D&D Gamma World* cards, available nowhere else, and awarded to players and DMs just for participating! If your store isn't participating yet, make sure to poke them to order their Game Day kits soon!

D&D Encounters Questions: Dragon Magazine Options

The beginning of the newest season of D&D Encounters spotlights the Essentials products, as adventurers explore in and around Restwell Keep, otherwise known as the Keep on the Borderlands. Players create their own 1st-level character using the *Heroes of the Fallen Lands* book (and with the start of Chapter 3, they can add *Heroes of the Forgotten Kingdoms*), but we've had a very legitimate question arise with the Essentials-supported articles in *Dragon* Magazine.

What content from *Dragon* Magazine is legal for D&D Encounters: Keep on the Borderlands?
Any content that directly supports the Essentials products is OK for players to use to create their character. So, if an article gives mage-specific options or introduces a new Essentials-style class, it's OK to create a character with those options.

It is the intent that for each season of D&D Encounters, we'll allow players to use the two Essentials books for character creation, plus one or two other products that we want to spotlight for the season, plus all accompanying *Dragon* Magazine content that supports those products. I call this Essentials+ character creation, which is designed to keep the amount of rules content useable at an accessible level for new players while spotlighting new content for existing players.

See you next time!

About the Author

Originally thought to have been raised from a humble Midwestern family, **Chris Tulach** actually fell to Earth in a meteorite-shaped capsule flung from a planet far outside our galaxy. While under the yellow rays of Sol, Chris's nerdity far surpasses that of any normal human. Using this precious gift only for good, he has become the D&D Organized Play Content Developer, responsible for the development and deployment of Dungeons & Dragons organized play programs. He is also the co-author of E2, *Kingdom of the Ghouls*.

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